

Scotland holiday Part 2

Saturday 25th June

Normally we'd have been on the boat overnight and would've been asleep back at home by this stage of the holiday but this time we were moving on for another week in Strontian. We were all up and about early at 6.40am and it was raining and cold outside :(I took Lyca out for a wee and flushed a Jay from the garden. There didn't used to be any Jay's that far north but they're obviously working their way up there. I was annoyed by the weather because it was forecast to be just cloudy not raining, so all the plans I had were left hanging in the balance.....Grrrrrrr! Lyca refused to eat her breakfast, which was handy (not) considering we had to pack up her bowls to take with us, so it'd have to come with us again for her to hopefully eat at lunchtime. While I ate my breakfast I noticed the 1st Goldfinch we'd had on the feeders but there was no sign of the Crestie or Red Squirrel returning before we left. I left a list of everything we'd seen in the garden for the owner so she could use it on her website and Wendy wrote her a quick note to let her know that she'd done the cleaning and most of the washing as well as thanking her for our stay.

I had a look at the weather forecast for the week ahead in Strontian in the hope that it'd changed but it was still predicting very heavy rain for every single day :(What were we going to do for an entire week in the middle of nowhere in the rain? Our entire trip centered around Butterflies and Dragonflies, which need the sun to come out.....Urrghhhhh! The weather in Speyside wasn't going to be much better but still, it was better than where we were going and we ½ wished we were going home! We still had some unfinished business to attend to though and would've been gutted to be going back without having seen Golden-ringed Dragonfly, Northern Emerald or Chequered Skipper, so at least we weren't leaving empty handed just yet! I had a look at my Fitbit to see how many steps we'd done during the past week and found out that we'd smashed our own record and had finished on a total of 163,000 steps.....Woo Hoo! It was a good job we'd managed to get out so much already, as we didn't fancy our chances of getting anywhere near that during the coming week. After consoling ourselves with the fact that at least we still had another whole week off work and would be going to explore somewhere totally new we carried on getting our stuff together. Lyca must've known we were leaving, as she was sulking on her favourite settee in the living room while we were getting ready. We didn't hear a peep out of her until we were ready to go! At 10.18am we waved, "Goodbye" to Ord Cottage and also the ½ decent weather, relatively speaking of course :(



Bye bye Ord

Five minutes later I was parking up in the car park opposite The Potting Shed. If the weather forecast was right we needed a commiseration prize for the week of depression looming over us. Wendy wanted to check the feeders at the back of the shop 1st, so we went over for a look. They were very busy and there were birds everywhere including Great-spotted Woodpeckers. Better than that though was the sight of 3x Red Squirrels stuffing their faces just in front of us!!



Spot the Squirrels

We'd now, without a doubt, seen more Red Squirrels on this trip than on any of our past ones. Obviously I wanted the Lindt Chocolate Cake but I pushed the boat out and got a slice of Lemon Cake too and we went back to the car. We shared the chocolate cake, which was just as nice as ever and saved the Lemon for later. We'd planned to go to the Small Blue/Dingy Skipper layby again and then Uath Lochans but with the forecast being totally wrong we had to ditch it all off, as it'd be pointless in the rain. We waved, "Goodbye" to the Ospreys at Loch Insh as we drove past and wished them luck feeling anything but excited about leaving. There aren't many places to stop off at on the way to Strontian, so I'd stuck to my plan of going back to Creag Meagaidh after we'd sussed it out in March. It looked really good but we needed it to stop raining if it was going to be of any use to us!

When we arrived at the car park to Creag Meagaidh at 11.23pm we couldn't believe our eyes.....the sun was out :)! We were hoping for Golden-ringed Dragonfly, Northern Emerald, Northern Brown Argus Butterfly and Black Grouse, so with no time to loose we got ourselves ready quickly, so as not to miss the window of opportunity. There was still a tiny bit of snow high up in the corries on the tops of the hills around us.



Creag Meagaidh

Everywhere looked so green compared to when we'd been in March and it looked like a different place. We walked around a field and found a Moth/Butterfly, so stopped for a look. It was totally black and unlike any that we'd seen before but I'd only been looking at a picture of one the other day, so surprised Wendy by saying what I thought it was. I reckoned it was a **Chimney sweeper Moth** and there wasn't just one, they were flying around everywhere.



Chimney sweeper

We stopped for a scan of some feeders behind a screen but there was nothing on them and there was a stream, which looked perfect for Golden-ringed Dragonfly. A **Redpoll** flew over and our next stop was the WC's where we also had a look at the info board outside to see which track to walk on.



Map

We decided to go up the hill to the viewpoint to admire the scenery that had been so different in March. We had a Fritillary Butterfly whizz past at 100mph but it disappeared behind the high bracken never to be seen again.....Grrrrrrrr. I then found a **Silver-Y Moth** but by the time we'd reached the top and were heading back down we'd seen nothing else. The view was very nice though!



Nice view

Coming down the hill is an area of wild flowers next a stream, so we paid it some attention. We could just imagine a Golden-ringed patrolling up and down and Butterflies feeding on the flowers but there was surprisingly little going on.



Just add sun!

I found a small Butterfly resting with its wings up in the grass, so we had a look. We were disappointed to find it was just a **Common Blue** and nothing new but it was still new for the trip I suppose. We spent far too much time looking at this section and the only other thing we found was some Sundew down at the bottom. A lizard ran across the boardwalk in front of me as we headed towards the Woodland area and then we found a stream with an info board. It had a picture of a Golden-ringed Dragonfly, so we scanned the stream for about 30 seconds before the sun went in.



Just to tease us!

There were loads of midgies, so we didn't stick around and headed back to the car. The big line of feeders in the Woods, which had been so busy in March were very quiet this time around but at least we managed to go the right way back to the car.

It was 12.52pm when we got back and after Lyca had been given a drink and turned her nose up at her breakfast again we ate our lunch. Wendy grabbed the Moth book out of the rucksack and confirmed Chimney sweeper, which was a lifer for us both. While we ate our lunch a huge family arrived and started to set up for a picnic in the picnic area over the wall in front of us. We reckoned they were Portuguese or something and they were waving their arms around above their heads and were obviously being bothered by midgies before they'd even started! It took ages for all the bags to be brought from the car and looked as though they had enough food to feed an army. When they all finally sat down to eat it started to rain but that's just typical good old Scottish weather for you!

Reckoning it was time to get going we set off at 1.19pm to make our way west towards the cottage in Strontian. We hadn't been going long when we came across an Steam Engine chugging down the road and at 1.24pm we were in Lochabar and had left our beloved Highlands behind us :(We didn't know if we were doing the right thing or not but it was too late to go back now, it was all booked and waiting for us to arrive. By the time we'd reached Spean Bridge at 1.39pm all the signs and house names had changed to Scottish Gaelic, which we've never seen before. It felt more like being in Wales or somewhere and the landscape was totally different to what we were used to as well. The huge rugged mountains and Caledonian Pine Forests had all gone and instead we were looking at mountains covered in a carpet of green and deciduous Woodlands. There was a Tours coach parked up in a car park with a group of people standing next to some kind of war memorial having their picture taken, as it was Armed Forces Day. It turned out that the memorial was a Commando Memorial and a category A listed monument dedicated to the men from the original Commando Forces in WW2. I reluctantly pulled into the car park so Wendy could take a picture, but I wasn't keen with so many people around.



Commando Memorial

We carried on passing Gairloch Caravan Park and 2x **Hooded Crows**, which wouldn't be unusual at home but a 1st for our trip! We then went over the Caledonian Canal.



Caledonian Canal

From then on the roads turned to single track, so progress was slow but the scenery was nice. Wendy spotted a Goosander on Loch Lochie and we started to feel like fish out of water having lost the familiar surroundings of the Highlands. Even when we've been over to The Black Isle we always breath a sigh of relief when we get back to Highlands, it's just so nice! Passing Loch Arkaig Wendy got me to stop so she could get a picture.



Loch Arkaig

I took the turning off to our next stop, which was slightly out of the way but hopefully worth it, and the road to it was worse than the Switchback! It was so long and bumpy it was untrue but we finally arrived at Allt Mhuic Butterfly Reserve at 2.15pm. I'd only recently read about the place and thought it was worth a shot for Chequered Skipper, Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary as well as Northern Emerald and Golden-ringed Dragonflies.



Carrot for the Donkey

We obviously didn't expect to come away with the lot but at least one would be nice! The weather was closing in which was a bit worrying, as we really needed the sun to peak out and even just for a minute would do!! First we climbed up another hill and Wendy saw a tiny **Shrew** running across the track ahead of us. The path took us to a grassy area with waist high bracken either side, which just wreaked of ticks.....Yuk! I really liked how they'd put Butterfly markers into the ground to give you an idea of which areas were best to concentrate on.



Brilliant!

We hadn't been going for long at all when Wendy shrieked, "Dragonfly!" This was exciting and we watched it fly down the path and eventually land on some bracken further down. My heart was in my mouth as I went over for a better look to confirm my suspicions. If it was what I thought it was it'd be a lifer for us both not to mention what I wanted most for my Birthday. I raised my bins and got it in view and couldn't believe our luck. Sitting on the bracken was a **Golden-ringed Dragonfly!!** Get in there!! After so many failed attempts to see one over the years it felt great to finally see such a stunning Dragonfly.



Golden-ringed Dragonfly

Wendy then said, "Ah well, I don't need to bother buying you a Birthday present now, you've got what you wanted" :P. I could've stayed there longer but Wendy and Lyca had started to get itchy feet, so we moved off. Wendy then spotted a large orange Butterfly flying so fast we couldn't keep track of it. It was definitely a Fritillary but it just flew past and kept going until we lost it. We spotted a couple more but again they were just too quick for our eyes to follow and there was also a **Meadow Brown**. While we were busy trying to ID super fast Butterflies Lyca decided to go up on her back legs and start dancing. She was facing the dense bracken, so there must've been something in there. All of a sudden there was the sound of a branch cracking then the rumble of hooves running away, so it 'd been a Deer. A small Moth flew across our path, so we followed it until it landed but neither of us could place it. It was a pretty little Moth, which looked like some kind of Carpet type but was too small and the markings were wrong, so I got my point and click and got a good enough shot of it to ID. Wendy checked the book later on and found out that it was a very appropriately named **Pretty Pinion** and a lifer for us both.



Pretty Pinion

Further up the path we found a flat ditch, which had Orchids growing in it. We soon had another Fritillary flying around, so I set about trying for a shot, which wasn't easy at all.



Where'd it go?

Next we noticed another Dragonfly and ended up with 2 more Golden-ringed Dragonflies zooming around and coming pretty close to us. Seeing as we'd started the day having never seen one before and ending it on 3 was more than a bit good :). Carrying on up the path we found another 2x Fritillaries and this time were landing because they were mating. This meant that I stood a better chance of getting a shot to ID them with. Every time they landed they were behind some bracken or grass and they really gave me the run around. Eventually I got one showing the underside of the wings, which is the only way of telling if they were Small Pearl-bordered or Pearl Bordered.....Phew! In the end we settled on **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary**. This is the best shot I ended up with, which unfortunately doesn't show the underwing.....Oooops!



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary

We also spotted a Yellow shell moth flitting about and carried on up the hill, finding ourselves squelching through a boggy area. Wendy suddenly stopped and pointed to the bracken up ahead. She'd heard a **Stonechat** and it didn't take us long to find the culprit, which surprisingly was our 1st of the trip. The sun had well and truly gone now so we had been very lucky to see any activity at all, it now looked like it was going to rain too! We were also annoyed to find that we were being followed by Horseflies.....Grrrrrrr! There were Orchids everywhere so I grabbed a photo of what I think is a Heath spotted?



Heath spotted Orchid

At the top of the reserve you come out onto a track and there were Butterfly markers there too, so I assumed something like Northern Brown Argus at the side of the road maybe?



Oh come on!

Needless to say we didn't see any of them only **Small Heath** and a **Four-spot Chaser** flying about. The view down from the track just as we were about to re-enter the reserve was very nice.



Nice

There were Horseflies and Midgies everywhere on our way back, which we weren't impressed with, so we were glad when we were on the home straight. The steep path took us down to the road where I found a dead Slow Worm. Unfortunately it looked as though whoever had been strimming the verge had flushed it out of wherever it'd been and it'd been very recently run over by a car. It was a real shame, as we've always wanted to see a Slow Worm but considering this specimens current (and very final) state we obviously couldn't tick it as a lifer.

We were back at the car at 3.41pm and when we left I thought I'd get some video of the narrow winding road with my Go-Pro. We'd been lucky to have dodged the rain so far and knew it wasn't going to last, so we'd definitely made good use of the days sunny spells. As we drove towards the A road to head towards Fort William we stopped off at some falls which are supposedly a big tourist attraction and Wendy hopped out to get a photo. I'm not sure what all the fuss is about, as I didn't think they were anything special.



Falls

As we drove through a particularly mountainous section of the route I saw the biggest of them all and said to Wendy, "Just think, we've been higher than that" to which Wendy looked puzzled. After a couple of seconds I realized that I was actually looking at Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Britain....Oooooops! Looking at I reckoned it didn't look much higher than Ben Macdui, which is the 2nd highest but Wendy just laughed and said, "OK let's just go bag that one while we're here, it won't take long!"

By 4.20pm the heavens opened and we lost all our views in pea soup, so it made us realize just how lucky we'd been at Allt Muic. Going through Fort William we had to laugh when we saw some people sitting outside in their garden having a barbeque under some tarpaulin :O! They must've until very recently been sitting in the sunshine but being good old Scots had decided to stick it out regardless. The downpours of rain were torrential at times making visibility terrible but we passed a Sea Loch and Wendy wanted to stop to take a photo.



Loch

There were sheep and lambs in the road and they were in no hurry to move out of the way for us! At 5.13pm we saw the 'Ard nam Urchan' sign, so we knew we were nearly there. There were sheep lying around on the seaweed covered rocks at another Sea Loch and I realized that my satnav had taken us the wrong way. When we got to Strontian at 5.30pm the weather was glorious, so even though I was a bit tired from the drive, there was no way I going to waste the decent weather and decided to give the nearby reserve a go. We turned in and found the local shop, so Wendy ran in for some milk and a few other bits but unsurprisingly there was no Lacto-free Milk, so I'd just have to see how I got on with normal milk. The shop was pretty basic and not at all like we'd imagined. We'd hoped that it'd be as good as the one in the Hebs but it didn't cater for anyone with any special dietary needs at all. We had a moan about that before we carried on to the end of a narrow track and found our HQ.



Bramble Cottage

It was 5.40pm when I parked up outside Bramble Cottage and we opened the door tentatively and peered inside. The hallway was massive and the cottage smelt lovely, so I started to haul our bags in while Wendy and Lyca had a look around. All I could hear was Wendy walking around saying, "Oh wow!" "I love it" and "OMG check this out!!!" I think she was pleased with it after thinking it was going to be so small you couldn't swing a cat in it. It looked tiny on the website but was deceptively spacious, so we were both pleasantly surprised, although I thought the hallway was far too wide and a waste of space. The sideboard in the hall had been handmade by the owner Ewan, who's a cabinetmaker and has his own business. He uses reclaimed Scottish hardwoods to make bespoke custom made furniture but we dread to think at what cost! After I'd brought everything in I told Wendy I was off out to make the most of the only sunshine forecast for the week. She was more than happy to stay and unpack while I went to check Ariundle Oakwood out, which looked amazing and was only 5 minutes away. Wendy decided that seeing as it was such a lovely evening she'd take photos of the cottage straight away because she may not have another chance and wanted to capture it at it's best.



Living room



Kitchen

Lyca finally decided to eat her breakfast from earlier and immediately settled in by claiming the double bed, so Wendy thought she'd better remove the whiter than white throw and cushion. While she was doing that something caught her eye and she looked down onto the quilt and was totally horrified to see a tiny tick crawling slowly up towards the pillows :O! She ran into the bathroom and grabbed some toilet roll to pick it up in and tried to squash it but it was totally indestructible, so she finally resorted to flushing it down the toilet! She was totally paranoid that there was more but after a good hunt around she hadn't found any, so presumed it'd dropped off Lyca. Hopefully she didn't have any more lurking in that wooly coat of hers but Wendy was going to have to have a good look later.

While all that was going on I was blissfully unaware and had found Ariundle Oakwood only 5 minutes up the road! The Oakwood is an area of ancient Atlantic coast Oakwood that Ardnamurchan is famous for. Due to it being this very special type of habitat there's the special wildlife to go with it and the main one being the Chequered Skipper Butterfly. These Butterflies are only found in about a 30 mile radius of Fort William and nowhere else in the British Isles and along with Pine Marten was our main target for the

I thought I'd better take a photo of the reserves map to make sure I didn't get lost :P.



Map

I didn't really know exactly what type of habitat I needed to be looking in for the Skipper so started checking everywhere. I didn't find much and quickly got bored of that. I took the first turning right, expecting to go over the bridge, so was shocked at what I saw.



Eh?

Hmmm.....I'd hit an unpassable ford. Errrr.....now what? There was no way I was taking my shoes and socks off and going for a paddle for this one so I turned back. I quickly realized my error when I turned down the correct track a bit further on and found the bridge over the river.



Phew!

It looked perfect for Dipper but yet again there was nothing. Over the river the habitat changed from Oakwood to boggy clumpy grassland with mountains in the distance.



Nice

With the sun out there were Fritillaries everywhere but again they were all Small Pearl-bordered even though Pearl bordered were supposed to be there as well.



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary

A bit further on I spotted a Blue Dragonfly. I'd been reading about Azure Dragonfly before we came away and wasn't sure if they got them round there or not. I was pretty sure they didn't as they're extremely rare but this Dragonfly looked a bit different to the Common Hawkers we get at home so my head went into overdrive.



Common Hawker

I put the image up on an ID site just to make sure I hadn't been ridiculously jammy and sure enough I hadn't. It was just a blue phase female Common Hawker in the end. My book didn't include that phase, so I made a mental note to buy the latest revision of the book when I got home! This area of the reserve was full of things to look at and I was having a great time then suddenly I saw a small dark Butterfly fly past. It was definitely something different from any I'd seen before but it vanished! I couldn't find it anywhere and I was gutted.....Arrghhhhhh! Just when I was having a good time and some luck for a change I'd got a kick in the nuts.....Urrghhhhh! Then, as if to cheer me up a Golden-ringed Dragonfly flew in and landed nearby!



Golden-ringed Dragonfly

This walk had turned into a right emotional rollercoaster! I realized I'd been out for quite a while having thought I was only going to be 30 minutes so I decided to get going. Walking back through the Oakwood, I found absolutely nothing.



Oakwood

This was really odd considering it's supposed to have all the Oakwood birds like Pied Fly, Wood Warbler, Redstart along with a good chance of seeing Pine Marten in the daytime.....Oh well. After a while I realized the walk was a lot further than I'd expected so I started to run, god knows where I got the energy from. My thinking was if I got back quickly maybe Wendy would want to go and have a look in what would probably be the only sunshine of the week. When I got back to the car I was knackered and shaking! I obviously hadn't had the energy at all and my mind had been playing tricks on me.....Doh!

When I got back it was 7.25pm and Wendy said she didn't fancy going out again. She just wanted to have tea then go for a bath to check for ticks, so I'd rushed back for nothing. Flipping heck! She did have a point though, as it was getting late by then, so I decided to call it a day. It seemed a shame as it was such a glorious evening but we had a lovely view from the living room window to admire.



View from the living room

I sat down in the kitchen with all my devices and discovered that the wifi didn't work with the Mac, which Wendy was using all the time.....Urrghhhh! I thought I could fix the problem if I could access the router but I couldn't find it anywhere and had to give up in the end. It's a good job I now take a 2nd laptop with me on trips to deal with my photos. Lyca, who'd only recently had her breakfast, was standing licking her lips and staring at Wendy, so she was given her tea too, which was gone in seconds! There was a Welcome pack on the kitchen table, which was really good and apart from the pate and tea bags Wendy snaffled the lot!



Welcome pack

There was also a pint of milk in the fridge, so even if we hadn't found the shop on our way in we'd have been OK for making tea and coffee until tomorrow. Wendy had a look in the hall cupboard and found the iron, washing basket, etc but on the top shelf was something, which really impressed us. There was a basket with a label on it saying 'Basket of useful things' and it certainly lived up to its name. There was shoelaces, toothpaste, toothbrush, torches, sanitary products, nail files and clippers, bite spray, Smidge, light bulbs, soap, tape measure, shower cap, boot polish, batteries, you name it was there! Everything inside had been so well thought out, so if you'd forgotten something the chances were you'd find it in the basket. There was an info folder in the living room that gave a bit of a history into the owners, asking guests to replace anything they took out of the basket of useful stuff as well as giving any suggestions as to anything they may have forgotten! They loved Strontian so much that they'd bought the cottage in 2015 and it was the 1st Holiday Cottage they'd ever owned, so they were new to the game. All the comments in the visitor's book were excellent too, so we got the feeling that we were going to like it there.

Finally we sat down to have our tea and relax for the rest of the evening. As it was the only decent night forecasted I had to get the moth trap out, so I went outside to set it all up. Within seconds I was being eaten alive by midgies so had to get Wendy to dig out my midgie net hat and tuck my PJ's into my socks to try and deter them! This was not a good look and I was very pleased that there were neighbours to admire my amazing fashion sense. It was unbearable out there and I just wanted to get the job done as quickly as possible.....Urrghhhh! Next I set the camera trap up facing a peanut butter sandwich to see what we could attract to the garden. There was a photo in the hall of a Pine Marten, which had been taken outside the cottage in daylight and we knew they visited the garden at night from info we'd got from the owners. We weren't optimistic

and knew from past experience that a Pine Marten in the garden was a bit of a tall order but it was still worth a shot.

After that I went back inside to join Wendy watching Glastonbury in the living room. All of a sudden she squeaked and looked at her hand to find a tiny black midgie biting her! This was quickly followed by another and then another, so after splatting the offending insects we realized that they must've managed to follow me in, so our midgie free zone had now been invaded :(Thankfully Lyca didn't seem to have any more ticks on her, so at least that was one good thing. It'd been a long and eventful day, so by 11.15pm we were both absolutely knackered, so we switched everything off and headed to our very comfortable bed.

Sunday 26th June

It was 5.38am when we woke up and curiosity got the better of us, so we didn't go back to sleep. Instead I went straight out to see how the moth trap had done and bring in the camera trap. The peanut sarnie was still lying in the bank, so we knew instantly that there'd been no Pine Marten. This time I was prepared for the midgies!!



Moth trap emptying

The resident Robin seemed to be enjoying the sarnie though, so I left it out. Wendy sat at the kitchen table with the pots of moths I was bringing in trying to ID them with the book until after an hour the trap was empty and I could pack it all away.....Phew! We reckoned we had a pretty good and varied haul and some of them would need a bit of time later to ID. We were very impressed by catching a funny looking **Drinker moth**, which was a lifer and one we'd always wanted to see :). Annoyingly when I released it to get a photo it just flew off, which isn't something that normally happens with a bigger moth :(.

After that we had our breakfast and I checked through the camera trap footage, which was pretty non-eventful apart from a Cat eating Moths from around the trap.....Grrrrrrrrrr! Amusingly the cat had bits that looked like a Wildcat and definitely had some genes in there but was obviously just a hybrid as it wasn't very well built.



Wildcat hybrid :P

After our early and busy start to the day we reckoned we needed to get going to try and beat the rain that was due to start at lunchtime. We were ready to go at 9am and I clipped Lyca into her harness in the back seat of the car and went back to get the rest of the stuff and to lock up. When we had everything I turned the key to lock up the house only to find that it didn't work! Uh oh! Thinking that I must've picked up the wrong key we hunted around for another without any joy. The key for the back door didn't work either, so out of interest I tried the one, which had been left in the hall for the front door in the back. Unbelievably we had 2 back door keys and no front, which made Wendy ask the question, "So you didn't lock up after you came back last night then?" I'd totally forgotten, so we'd slept in an unlocked house.....Ooops! We didn't think for one minute that Strontian was the crime capital of the West Coast and it'd probably be safe to just go out but we certainly didn't want to take the risk. As there was no phone signal at the house I couldn't phone anyone either, so it was decided that I'd go out in the car to find a signal and phone the number on the key.

I unclipped a very confused and disappointed Lyca out of the car and brought her back into the house to wait with Wendy. I drove off down the road until I got a signal and dialed the number only to find that it was dead. Now what? I went back to HQ and we rummaged through the info folder until we found the number for the local house manager and both of the owners. I wrote them down and went out again to find a signal before phoning the house manager. Nobody answered and it just rang and rang and then.....I ran out of credit! This was getting stupid now and I had to race back to HQ to top up before I could phone anyone else....Urrgghhhh! As if I didn't have enough to worry about already I was now wondering how on earth I'd run out of credit already having only topped up 4 days ago. It didn't make sense and I'll be looking into changing my provider in future! The top up didn't go smoothly either as the website wasn't working properly! It was 9.40am when I headed out again and after trying all 3 numbers and getting no reply from any of them I had no choice than to go back to HQ. When I got back Wendy pointed out that even if any of them tried phoning me back they wouldn't be able to as we had no signal at the cottage.....Aarrghhhhh! I emailed the owners and sent messages via whatsapp but apart from that I couldn't do any more. I couldn't even stay at HQ until I got a reply, so I had to go out again.....Urrghhghh! We were beginning to get a bit worried by then, so I was very relieved to eventually get hold of the house manager's wife.....Phew! He was just round the corner at the shop and she said she'd send him round as soon as possible. I headed straight back to HQ and within a few minutes Wendy spotted a bloke heading towards the front door, so she took Lyca out into the garden to prevent her from barking. The bloke was really nice and very

apologetic because it turned out that he'd left us the wrong key after all. Oh dear! A Lesser Black-backed Gull swooped down and took off with the peanut butter sarnie and after that we could finally go out.

It was 10.15am when we drove away and surprise surprise, it had already started to rain, the delay had totally done us over :(Our 1st stop was a short walk to Garb Eilean Wildlife Hide, which was meant to be good for White-tailed Eagle and Otter, so I parked up in Ardery car park at 10.33am. Interestingly the interpretation board had Chequered Skippers all over it! I never knew that they were there so I made a mental note to pop in if ever the sun was out! We could hear a Tree Pipit and Willow Warblers singing from the woods around us and crossed over the road. The path was yet again steep ups and downs, which was made even more difficult by the loose gravel surfacing.



Urrghhhh

It was still raining too, which made it all very slippery, so we weren't enjoying it although Lyca was having a great time as usual. When we got to the hide there was a couple of people in the far corner, so we stopped just after the door for a scan. Before long we realized that we were right next to the entrance of a Wasp nest, so we had to move. The Loch must've looked lovely on a sunny calm day but with the rain and low cloud it was a dreary view that lay before us.



Dreary

There was Common Tern, Eider, Oystercatcher, Canada Goose, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Seal, Common Sandpiper, Greylag, Great Black-backed Gull and Heron but nothing particularly interesting, so we didn't hang around. It looked great for Otters and Eagles but as usual we had no such luck. When we left we saw a Great-spotted Woodpecker just outside the hide and a Redpoll flew over. We stopped off at the viewpoint for look but the view was a bit disappointing and we headed straight back to the car.



What view?

It was 11.45am by then and the weather was anything but nice. The area definitely had potential but in the rain everything was keeping a low profile, so who knows what we would've seen if the sun had been out. We decided to head home for lunch in the hope that it'd clear up a bit after that.

By the time we pulled up outside HQ it was 12.10pm and the rain was even heavier than ever and the midgies were out in force, so it wasn't looking hopeful for a very eventful day. After lunch we felt really lethargic and unmotivated, so Wendy rustled something up for her tea while she had the chance. The rain carried on relentlessly but I felt

loathed to stay in, so decided that we'd take a spin out to Ardnamurchan Point. Cornwall would have you believe that Land's End is the most westerly point in Britain but in actual fact it's not, it's Ardnamurchan Point. Ah well, we'd planned to go there anyway and seeing as it was so horrible out and looked unlikely that we'd be outside walking it seemed like a plan especially as it would take an age to get out there. Probably best to be driving in the rubbish weather rather than waste decent weather doing it.

We headed out again at 1.36pm and 1st off I had to get petrol from down the road. Wendy went into the shop to see if it was any better than the other one but it wasn't. All she wanted was a cucumber for her sarnies and Lyca but neither had any! She'd have to save the remainder of the one she'd brought with her and just keep it for Lyca until she could find another somewhere. Oh the simple things! On the drive through the greyness we had no view whatsoever, which was a real shame, as we could imagine the scenery to be stunning. One thing we had noticed was that having imagined we would be driving alongside the Lochs most of the time at Ardnamurchan, in reality they were obscured by trees or the road was nowhere near them. This was disappointing, as all our hopes of stumbling across Otters went out the window. There were loads of huge modern houses along the route mixed in with old ramshackle 60's houses. In every single one of those houses they had a static caravan in the garden and normally some sort of JCB digger!! How odd! Driving through Salen we found Salen Hall, which gave any of the ones we'd found amusing in Carrbridge a run for their money!



All mod cons :P

Next we found ourselves at Naddura Visitor Centre, so I pulled in for want of something better to do. Yet again there was no view but you could imagine it'd be lovely on a good day.



Naddura

We had to leave Lyca in the car, so we could go in for a look but 1st we were distracted by a recent sightings board outside. When we read that there'd been 5x White-tailed Eagles in the field next to the Visitor Centre yesterday our hearts sank. There was no chance we were going to see any Eagles in the horrendous weather we were having never mind 5 of them really close.....Grrrrrr! We wandered inside and found a café with quite a few people sitting down having food. Where the *** had they come from? We had a look round the gift shop 1st and picked up a couple of pressies then went through into the educational section for a nosey. I was expecting something on a par with the House of Manannin or something but what we found were a few posters on the walls and some glass cabinets with some terribly stuffed dead animals like Pine Marten and Otter that looked more like a cat and a dog. My favourite exhibit was a dirty old pond outside that had a glass wall that you were supposed to be able to see under the surface of the water. The only problem was that the glass was filthy and the pond was full of algae. All I could see were dead tadpoles stuck to the side of the glass!!



Algae pond

We'd seen enough by then and made a quick exit back to the car where Lyca was still waiting for a walk and raring to go. This Visitor Centre was the only real tourist

attraction on the whole of the Ardnamurchan Peninsula so if this was the best this area had to offer we were in for an interesting week to say the least! It was 2.50pm when we left and we carried on along the bumpy, winding, single track nightmare of a road hoping that it wasn't going to take us too long to get to the Point. Through the thick fog/mist we could just about see a very moody looking Loch Mudle, where there was a **Red Deer** down on the beach, so Wendy got me to stop for a photo.



Loch Mudle

That was our 1st Red Deer of the trip and we found 3 more, further down the road in someone's garden. We also had our 1st **Linnets** flying over the road at somewhere than can only be described as the middle of nowhere! As we climbed higher up into the hills and into more gloom Wendy spotted a very wet looking bird sitting on top of some bracken and asked me to pull over. She had an idea of what it was but wanted to confirm it, as it'd be a new bird for the trip. There were no passing places nearby, so I had to just stop in the middle of the road and hope no one came round the corner. Surely nobody else would be mad enough to be out there? Wendy raised her bins and called out, "**Whinchat!**" so I could then carry on. We hadn't got far when Wendy said that there was something crawling across the road and that I might have run over it! I pulled over and looked behind us and she was right, there was something, so I jumped out and ran up the road to see what it was. It was a **Toad** and (excuse the pun) a lucky Toad at that, as I hadn't run over it.....Phew! By that point we'd just about had enough and the road started to get more and more potholes the further we drove. Lyca wasn't happy either and was panting heavily in the back and trying to get into the front. Wendy found another Whinchat and then a juvenile Wheatear, which was nice considering we don't see them back at home. Just when we thought things couldn't get any more bleak and gloomy we arrived at the bottom of the hill to Ardnamurchan Point. We had to wait at some traffic lights before we could go anywhere, which being the only nutters around for miles was hilarious!



Traffic lights?

I drove up the hill and turned the corner to be faced with the most run down and dismal looking tourist attraction we'd ever seen! I'd hoped it wouldn't be the monstrosity that Land's End is but I wasn't expecting it to be a derelict 70's mess. It was 3.38pm when I parked at Ardnamurchan Point car park and we looked around at our view, wondering why on earth we'd bothered! The lighthouse, which housed some kind of exhibition was old, shabby and desperately needed a lick of paint!



Wow!

Remarkably we weren't the only people there and there was a 4x4 parked up too. We'd hoped to do a bit of sea watching from there as it's supposed to be fantastic for Whales and Dolphins but looking out to sea all we could see was a thick pea soup. Unbelievably we saw a Gannet but were then distracted by 2x Border Collies, one of which seemed adamant to vandalise my car. One of them was just running around like a feral dog but the other was bashing itself against my car, which was all I needed to top off a pretty **** day. The one outside the car had wild eyes and on closer inspection some kind of huge satellite tag on its collarWhat the...? Great!



Mad dog

We tried to have another look out to sea and found nothing else apart from a **Kittiwake** and **Guillemot** but everything about the place screamed, "Get the hell out of here!" The people in the 4x4 had obviously had enough too and started to head back down the hill but the dogs had other ideas. The one with the collar wouldn't let them go and was standing in front of their car like a sheep dog herding sheep. In the end the woman got out and after a few minutes she managed to shoo it away, so they could escape the hell-hole. We'd decided to follow suit, while the coast was clear of dogs and passed what we 1st thought was derelict but in fact turned out to be an open café!!



Café

Maybe on a sunny, clear day it's an idyllic place to be but on this occasion it was not remotely nice by any stretch of the imagination. God knows what the exhibition in the lighthouse consisted of but we certainly weren't going to stick around to find out! We couldn't get away quick enough but still had the entire bumpy, slow journey through pea soup still to do in reverse.....Urrghhhhhh! Lyca was now obviously not happy and had her tail between her legs and was slobbering and panting like we'd never seen before, she just wouldn't settle on the back seat. Wendy was getting concerned and wanted me to stop the car, which I did. We thought maybe she needed a wee, so I let her out and

she instantly did one but then ran straight back to the car. I let her back in and we carried on to our next stop, where we'd hoped she could have a walk. I'd been prepared for the single-track roads but what I wasn't prepared for was just how claustrophobic they felt! There were overhanging trees, which made them feel more narrow and blind corners everywhere with other cars driving too fast around them. Whatever it was it made me feel uneasy and I'm no stranger to narrow roads coming from the Isle of Man!

At 4.20pm we arrived at Sanna Bay, which is rated as one of the most beautiful beaches in Britain. Maybe it is but in the pouring rain the area didn't quite live up to our expectations but we had to give Lyca a walk somewhere.



Sunny Sanna

I decided to put my waterproof over-trousers on before I got out and began the process still in my seat. It was no easy task trying to put them on in the footwell and after a couple of minute of fumbling and cursing I pulled them up only to find that they were on back to front....Doh! Wendy was amused but I'd already wasted bags of time and to have to go through it all again was a painful prospect. All we wanted to do was get the walk out of the way as quickly as possible and get back to the comfort of our HQ. By the time I was sorted the rain was torrential and Wendy got out of the car to get Lyca from the back. While she was hooking her up to her lead she found a dead tick on the back seat.....Aarrghhhhhhh! At least it was dead and not alive like the one she'd found on the bed! We set off into the greyness and were welcomed by a sign, which wasn't really what you'd expect at a nationally well-known tourist site. Instead of being an info board about the area and its wildlife it read in massive letters, "KEEP DOGS ON LEADS, IF SEEN WORRYING SHEEP THEY WILL BE SHOT!" Wow! What a lovely warm and welcoming place Sanna Bay was! We were drenched within seconds as we walked through a soggy field covered in sheep poo and down to the beach. I flushed 3x **Snipe** out of a particularly boggy area and they all flew off, so luckily Wendy saw them too, although neither of us could see much out of our glasses by then. The beach looked very much like the ones in the Hebs and bizarrely Wendy was rather taken by it and commented that even though the weather was horrendous the sea was still a turquoise blue and the sand was still white.



Tropical

I wasn't remotely impressed after the sign about dogs being shot and the field of sheep poo so it was just a dump to me and would remain that way forever. I walked Lyca down to the shoreline while Wendy tried to find an interesting shell or something to bring back with us and I wondered why on earth she'd want to remember it! Our feet were squelching in our shoes and Wendy's trousers were sticking to her legs so it was difficult to make the experience anything but unpleasant. Poor Lyca was having a great time and was completely unaffected by the weather but she was out of luck and we weren't hanging around for long. On the way back I took us through the dunes and then through a field of long grass, which lead to Wendy cursing behind me about how her shoes were never going to dry before tomorrow. Back at the car we were dripping wet and I took my coat off while Wendy sat in a puddle and dried her glasses and bins off. Lyca looked like a drowned longtail and was covered in sand, so my car was an absolute mess just to top thing off. The people in the 4x4 from Ardnamurchan Point were parked up nearby but they weren't getting out for a walk and were just admiring the view. Hah what view? Driving away we came across a strange hut with graffiti on the side. We have no idea if it was some mad hippy's house or not but whatever it was it was yet another bad advert for Sanna Bay!



Meet the locals

We left at 4.56pm and started the uncomfortable drive home. Passing the rather grand looking Glenborrodale Castle we noticed it was being hired out for some sort of corporate function. We hate to think how much that was costing!

When we arrived back to the safety of HQ it was 6.09pm and Wendy ran in to grab Lyca's towel and the hairdryer so we could deal with that first. I brought Lyca in and Wendy set about drying her while I got the rest of the stuff in from the car and got changed out of my soaking wet clothes. When Lyca was dry enough Wendy took her dripping wet coat off and then got changed too, so we felt a bit more human again in no time. We all had tea after that and Wendy went off for a soak in the bath to try and forget about the unpleasant day we'd just had. When she came back she said that she had 34 midgie bites, so I had a quick check and had got away lightly with just 11 :). While we sat watching TV we could hear the rain lashing against the windows and the forecast for the rest of the week was for similar. If it was right then we'd be wasting our time and didn't stand a chance of seeing anything we'd gone all that way for :(I kept my fingers crossed for the forecast to be right for Wednesday, as I had my heart set on doing a day trip to Mull and we needed at least a little bit of sun for that. I was also looking forward to the nighttime drive on Polloch Road for Pine Marten and Wildcat but obviously we needed good weather for that too! We had a fridge full of Moths to deal with before we could go to bed, so after the rain had stopped I brought them into the living room to let them go out of the window. There were so many midgies outside I thought it would be better but as soon as I opened the window they started to bail straight in. It seemed as though they'd all been buzzing round the windows like in a zombie movie just waiting for an invitation inside.

Moth List (* = lifers)

Willow Beauty x2
Silver-ground Carpet x2
Buff Ermine x4
Map-winged Swift x10
Clouded Border x3
Coxcomb Prominent x2
Buff tip x1



Buff tip

Heart and Dart x2
Poplar Hawk-moth x2
Green Arches x1

Dark Arches x1
Double Square-spot x1
Pale-shouldered Brocade x2
Pebble Prominent x1
Mottled Beauty x7
Udea olivalis (micro) x1 *
Flame x1
Drinker x1 *
Burnished Brass x1
Common Wave x2
Flame shoulder x1
Light Emerald x2
Endothenia quadrimaculana (micro) x1 *
Un ID'd x2

= 53 moths (26 sp)

After the moths had gone and the camera trap and jam sarnie had been put out we tried to watch Glastonbury and relax before bed but we were getting eaten alive by the midgie invaders so gave up at 10.55pm.

Monday 27th June

When we woke up at 7.45am we could hear the rain on the windows, so our hearts sank. I got up and took Lyca out for a wee in it and brought the camera trap in. Like a total miracle the sun came out shortly after that which brought the midgies out. As we sat eating breakfast I looked through the night's video footage and had to do a double take. I looked at it again and looked at Wendy with my jaw hanging open. She instantly knew what this meant and squealed in excitement, "No wayyyyyy.....show me, show me!" I turned the screen around and showed her the image on the back and I don't think either of us could really believe what we were seeing. We'd finally had the visitor we'd been hoping for on all our trips to Scotland.....a **Pine Marten**! :O!



OMG!!!!

One thing was certain and that was that we were going to stay up tonight to wait and see if the promise of a jam sarnie was enough to bring it back. While I was trying to think of what to do today Wendy was itchy, so had another midgie bite count and after last night she'd gained 4 more and was on 38! I'd gained 6 more but was still only on 17 :). The sun started to appear again, so we got our stuff together and headed out at 10am, just in time for more black clouds to start rolling in.....Grrrrrr!

I opened the car and Wendy thought it'd be a good idea to shake the sand off the back seat cover before Lyca got in. I agreed and set about doing it while Wendy waited with Lyca on her lead. Out of the blue a young and overly boisterous Border Collie came hurtling round the corner and ran straight up to Lyca, who totally freaked :O! She was barking, the Border Collie was barking, they both started snarling and Lyca was lunging herself all over the place in blind panic while the other dog relentlessly hassled her. Wendy's heart was racing and she was struggling to keep her under control. The flexi-lead was wrapped around her legs and I was trying my hardest to get the seat cover back in so we could get her into the car and away from the Collie. In the end I ran round, grabbed Lyca's lead and bundled her into the car but the Collie was still trying to follow her and was jumping up at my car scratching the paintwork.....Grrrrr! Where was its owner? Looking around in desperation Wendy saw an old guy walking towards us holding a lead in his hand, shaking his head and saying, "I'm so sorry" over and over. He was doubled over and had an obvious tremor, so didn't look to be in good health at all. He finally managed to get his dog on its lead and was more than a bit apologetic. Wendy tried to explain that although his dog was just being friendly and playful Lyca is scared stiff of behavior like that, so it wasn't his dogs fault. He shouldn't really have had it off the lead to start with but not all dogs are as freaked out as Lyca. They had a chat for a few minutes and Wendy found out that his dog was only 1 year old, very friendly and called Spud. Apparently Spud is a common nickname for the guy's Irish surname, which was Murphy, so she'd learned something new at least. He'd lived in the area for 40 years and was still trying to be accepted as a local but didn't fancy his chances much! Wendy had a moan about the weather and he told her not to believe the forecasters, as they're quite often wrong for Strontian. Looking at the sky it looked as though they had it bang on but she really hoped he was right. Eventually she made her excuses and the old bloke said something that made us really stop and think. He thanked her for taking the time to chat with him and said that it'd made his day :O! Who knows how many people he speaks to in an average day but it didn't sound like many :{.

We finally left HQ at 10.15am and stopped for a scan of Loch Sunart down the road.



Loch Sunart

We glanced a big dark Mallard sitting on the edge of the seaweed but I just dismissed it as a freak Mallard but.....we found out later this was a **Black Duck** that has been resident at Strontian for years! Urrghhhhhh!

Considering there'd been 1,400 Otter Holts found around this Loch alone the Otters themselves were proving much harder to find. We heard a familiar call from home, which we hadn't heard on our trip yet and found a **Rock Pipit** down on the beach. We carried on to our next stop hoping that the weather would stay OK for us and that we'd finally find an Otter.

It was 10.51am when I parked up at Castle Tioram car park and Lyca was raring to go. We walked down to the beach where Lyca was pulling like mad to go for a paddle.



Loch Tioram

We looked around and had finally hit the jackpot with finding somewhere nice in Ardnamurchan. There was a group of people out in canoes but unfortunately the tide was in, so we couldn't walk out to the Castle but we hoped it'd possible later after we'd been for a walk.



Canoeists

I'd found this walk in an Ardnamurchan walks book I'd bought and it was rated as easy as well as being good for seeing Otter, so it looked perfect. We followed the beach round and found 2x Common Sandpipers, which obviously flew off when we got too close. It was funny seeing one of them perched in a tree waiting for us to go past and I attempted to get some shots.

Next we found the footpath and started to walk round the base of a steep cliff around the Loch, which climbed upwards to give us a cracking view.



Oooooo

Further on and the path started to get more narrow and in places disappeared meaning that we had to scramble over tree roots and up rocks, which must be lethal in the rain. Now I don't have a head for heights, so this wasn't ideal terrain for me and to make things worse Lyca seemed adamant that she was walking right on the edge. Wendy started to wonder how on earth we were getting back to the car park in a loop because there was no sign of us turning back on ourselves up ahead. Instead, the path, which was getting even worse, just carried on climbing upwards around the huge Loch.



Eh?

I scratched my head and looked at the map wondering how exactly it could've been classed as easy! The sky started to close in and then the rain started, so we took shelter under some trees hoping it'd pass over. This now meant that all the tree roots and rocks we'd have to clamber back down would now be wet and slippery not to mention the ones up ahead, so we decided not to go any further and to turn back. The rain stopped quickly and the sun came out again, so we headed back cautiously. Lyca was walking precariously close to the edge, so was hard to keep in check as well as negotiating the treacherous path myself with my camera on my shoulder. On the more tricky bits I had to hand her over to Wendy whilst I traversed the sections on my bum! She'd offered a few times but I was trying to avoid it, as I didn't want her to aggravate her back problem, so had declined up until that point! When Lyca was handed back Wendy went ahead and tested out how slippery the path was, so at least I had warning if I had to be careful. Luckily it wasn't too bad and we made it back down without any incidents. All that and not a single Otter.....Urrghhhh! The Common Sands were still there, so I tried again to get some shots while Wendy walked up and down the waters edge with Lyca, who was paddling and having a great time.



On me hols :)

Despite the lack of Otters and tricky walk Wendy had decided to have another one of her moments. She was blown away by the place and wanted to stop time and just stay there forever! While she was off in a world of her own I could see that the sky was looking dodgy again, so after a while I told her that it was probably advisable to go before we got soaked! That burst her little hippy bubble.....Hahahahahaha! Unfortunately the tide was still too far in to walk to the Castle but Wendy loved it there so much I agreed to go back to try again another day, depending on the weather of course!



Wendy's utopia

We walked back along the waters edge with Wendy hanging miles behind to eek out as much of the time there as possible and to try and find a souvenir to take home. By the time she caught up with me at the car, clutching a handful of tiny little Tower of Auger shells and an Oyster shell to add to her collection, it was 12.30pm and raining lightly. I told her that the Oyster shell had probably been thrown overboard from some millionaires boat during a poncey lunch but she didn't buy it :P.

Just before we left the wind started to pick up big time, so we knew there was worse weather to come. We'd definitely been lucky to have such good weather but it didn't last for long and the heavens opened. We needed to find somewhere nice to eat lunch and I had just the place in mind.

We arrived at Kentra Bay at 12.53pm and the car park was full, so I had to park in front of a gate with a 'Keep Clear' sign on it. The problem wasn't that there was loads of people there but that a car with a caravan had parked horizontally across about 4 spaces and there was a horse box there too.....Grrrrrrr! Wendy jumped out of the car to get some photos before it rained again and then we cracked open our lunch.



Kentra Bay

It looked as though it'd be a lovely spot on a sunny day and we could even have done the walk but as we ate our lunch it chucked it down....again! All we found on the Loch was a moulty male Red-breasted Merganser and then a couple of weird buggy things came over the hill, which was probably a Deer stalking tour.....Yuk! The entire area was raised bog and how I imagine places like Lochindorb used to look before they was ruined for Grouse shooting. The people on the horses were heading back to the car park, so I needed to leave before them, as my car was blocking their access to get out.

I drove away and found a lovely looking place called Ardtoe and parked up in the car park. There was a notice saying you had to pay 50p but there was no machine around. Wendy got out for a look and found an old house with a scrawly hand written notice stuck to the front door, asking patrons to post the car parking money through the letterbox...What? She did but looking back she reckons it was just someone trying it on :P. I spotted a large bird soaring over the hills in the distance and although it could well have been an Eagle it was just too far away to be certain. We wandered down to the small beach where Wendy found some rocks to climb up and sit on cross-legged to admire the very nice view.



Lovely

I took Lyca down to the sea for another paddle and yet again we were lucky that the rain had stopped for the time being. I bet it wouldn't have looked anywhere near as nice if it had been.



Making the most of paddling

Wendy had spotted a tent pitched up over in the far corner of the beach and when some hippy guy with mad curly hair and no shoes came out of it she wasn't surprised. Another couple followed him out and they all walked past Wendy and up to the car park. Hippy dude gave Wendy the nod and a smile on his way past, so yet again she'd lived up to her reputation of attracting any random weirdo within a 10mile radius. I bet if he didn't already have company she'd have ended up chatting to him for the next 30 minutes! There wasn't anything to do there, so we went back to the car where hippy dude and the couple were standing chatting outside a campervan. Wendy reckoned that the couple were visiting hippy dude with a fresh supply of smokables for him but I had other un-publishable ideas.

On the way to our next stop we approached a shop, so Wendy ran in and came out looking happier than I ever thought possible at having just bought a cucumber. At least she could have it in her sarnies again at last instead of it being exclusively for Lyca's treats :). Our next stop was somewhere that I'd found mentioned a lot of times during my research. It was supposed to be THE place in Ardnamurchan for Northern Emerald Dragonflies. The only issue was whether we'd get a long enough sunny spell or any sunny spell at all while we were there.

Arriving at Claish Moss it was 2.07pm and raining slightly. Claish Moss is one of the best examples in Britain of a 'raised' bog, which has evolved over the last 8000 years. The walk we were going on climbed through a plantation but was surrounded by the bog. The map showed that the route went up through the plantation for a few miles then onto a track leading through the trees to view the actual bog reserve. There wasn't much in the way of sun, so things didn't start very well at all. Even so, we kept reminding ourselves that Lyca still needed a good walk, so it wasn't a complete waste of time like it would be if it was just the 2 of us. We set off up the path, which ran between the woods and straight away we had 2x Dragonflies zooming around overhead despite the lack of sun.



Claish Moss

The rain then became heavier, so we sheltered under the trees and stayed totally dry until it passed and the sun started to try and peak through again. As we carried on all the insects started to re-emerge and we found a **Red-necked Footman** Moth and there were Common Darters everywhere.



Red-necked Footman

Wendy found a Beetle on the path lying on it's back with it's legs in the air, so she bent down to turn it the right way round and totally missed a Sparrowhawk whooshing through like a bolt of lightening. The path kept climbing uphill and was much longer than we'd expected and then I noticed that my new lens cap had fallen off somewhere along the line! Arrgghhhh.....that cost me £20 but hopefully I would spot it on the way back. By then we were starting to get tired but we came across a Red Deer munching on some grass at the side of the woods. I grabbed a quick pic before it spotted us and bolted into the trees.



Red Deer

Lyca, who's normally the 1st to know about these things, was oblivious to its presence, so it went unnoticed. The sun was making the temperature soar and there were loads of Moths flying around. We found **Common marbled Carpet**, Bordered White, Clouded Border and loads of micros that we didn't have time for as there's so many of them and they all look like a grass seed when they land. When I realized the track to view the bog didn't exist anymore we decided not to go any further and the absence of my new lens cap was beginning to annoy me, as it meant my lens could get scratched if I wasn't careful, so we turned back. On the way back I couldn't help but comment on all the fantastic track side pools.



Pools

No wonder this place was so good for Dragonflies, if only the sun had properly come out I reckon it would've been caked in Emeralds! On the way down we had our eyes peeled for my lens cap and ½ way down Wendy spotted it quickly followed by Lyca, who ran over to it and gave it a good sniff. A bit further on we flushed 2x Tree Pipits off the path

and another Jay but we were back at the car at 3.55pm just before the heavens opened again.....Phew! Good timing or what?

We didn't really know what to do after that and seeing as it was raining we called it a day and headed for home. Passing Ardery car park the sun came out, so we quickly diverted in hoping that the Chequered Skippers would be out. Unfortunately there was nothing, apart from 100's of midgies and then more rain came so we took that as a hint and went home.....Booooooooo :(.

It was only 4.31pm when we got back to HQ and far too early for tea, although Lyca had other ideas. I went outside to move the bird feeder I'd hung up on a branch outside the French window in the kitchen. I mentioned to Wendy that I was sure I'd heard a Woodpecker on our 1st day and hadn't even finished the sentence when a Great-spotted Woodpecker flew in. We pottered around for a bit before having tea and I settled down to watch the football while Wendy went for a bath. Looking at my fitbit I was surprised to see that we'd managed to do 18,700 steps, which wasn't bad at all considering it was meant to rain all day. The old guy from earlier may have been right about the forecast for Strontian or maybe we'd just been lucky? We'd certainly find out tomorrow because the forecast was for rain all day again :(.

Wendy was bored, so did her nails while frowning at the football on the TV and frequently asking, "Is it nearly finished yet?" She wasn't very happy that it was on and has no interest whatsoever in it even though it was the Euros!! We stuck to our plan of staying up to see if we could see our Pine Marten in the flesh.

I let Lyca out for a wee early at 10.14pm and put the jam sarnie and camera trap out, so it'd think we'd gone to bed and wouldn't be put off. We then turned the TV and all the lights off and pulled up a chair each in the kitchen facing the french window. Lyca must've been tired and took herself off to bed, which was a good thing because she could've scared it off. We sat as still as we could with our eyes focused on the bank outside but it looked too light out for any nocturnal visitors. Wendy reckoned we should partially close the blinds so as not to confuse it into noticing something was different, so I got up and did just that. I sat back down and we waited again.....Yawn. All of a sudden at 10.30pm we saw a movement and our hearts started to race. Our excitement was short lived though when we realized it was the cat from the camera trap on the 1st night and our hearts sank instantly. It quickly cleared off and we resumed our wait until something else caught our eye at 10.40pm! We couldn't believe it.....it was that ***** cat again.....Grrrrrrr! We'd started to flag by then and the concentration of staring into the darkness was taking its toll. I'd been adamant that we'd make it to at least 11.30pm when it was caught on the camera trap the night before, so we stuck it out. We got to the crucial time zone and were just starting to feel as though anything could happen when it did! We weren't expecting what did happen but we were aware that it could've been 'anything.' Coming through the woods towards us was, not a Pine Marten like we'd hoped for but the bright light of a torch.....Noooooooooooo! It turned out to be a local laborer, who we'd seen knocking around, on his way back from the pub.....Aarrghhhhh! This was the worst thing that could've happened and if there'd been any Pine Marten nearby before it would almost certainly be miles away after that! It was 11.45pm by then and we were so tired that we gave up having failed big time. When we went to bed at 12am Lyca was out for the count, snoring loudly and we weren't far behind.

Tuesday 28th June

It was 9.15am when we all woke up and as forecast it was throwing it down with rain. Wendy had been up for a wee earlier and had been unable to resist a sneaky peek outside to see if the jam sarnie had gone. She didn't know how she'd have felt if it'd gone and we'd missed the Pine Marten but it was still there, so we had made the right

decision to pull the plug when we did. When we got up later it'd gone but it must've been the Hoodies in broad daylight.....or was it? We'll never know for sure but one thing we did know was that we needed a plan for our last day when we'd be travelling down to Heysham as I still hadn't got a clue what to do or even which route to travel down on. We were in no hurry to go out in the horrible weather, so while Wendy was being a complete child and making use of the colouring in book she'd bought to keep her amused on rainy days I started to hatch a plan like an adult :P. I asked her if she thought we should leave the west coast as early as possible to go and find some better weather and her reply was priceless. She said, "Yeah, let's get the hell out of here as soon as possible!" but she didn't mean it exactly how it came across. She was agreeing that we needed to get going and make the most of the last day somewhere where it wasn't miserable and raining. It was a shame things were panning out the way they were but if the weather was forecast to be good we'd have been reluctant to leave. I thought we'd be best heading straight down south to Leighton Moss, where we could take Lyca down to the public hide and then finish off at the Silverdale Hotel, which my Mum and Dad had said was under new management since our 1st and only visit there and was now much better.

Happy with that we then played 'Where's Wally' on my ipad which brought us to lunchtime when we were still in our PJ's! With us not being out and about Wendy made toasties for lunch, which was a real treat having lived off sarnies for the past week and a half.....Om nom nom :). Several cups of tea later it was still raining, so I started skating in my socks up and down the laminate floor in the hall :P. That massive hallway had to serve some kind of purpose and I'd just found it. It also felt like a bit of a fun workout to burn the calories from the toastie off. Wendy joined in too and then came a new slant on the game in the form of Lyca, who can't stand to be left out of anything. She was running after us slipping and sliding all over the place with her tail wagging like mad :). After a while we were knackered and our stomachs hurt from laughing at our childish antics, so we had to stop. Looking outside it was still raining at 1pm, so we set about ID'ing my Fritillary photos. They were all Small pearl-bordered, so we still needed Pearl bordered but in the rain it was looking highly unlikely.

By 2.28pm the rain had stopped but it was still grey outside, so seeing as she hadn't been there yet I thought I would show Wendy Ariundle Oakwood as it was only 5 minutes away and I really liked the place. We stopped down the road at the jetty on Loch Sunart for another scan for Otter but it came as no surprise that there was absolutely nothing out there.



Loch Otterless

One thing we weren't in short supply of was Common Sands and there were 3 on the beach one of which was a juvenile and the 2 x Rock Pipits also had a juvenile with them.

The weather was anything but favourable as we approached the Oakwood and any vague hopes of seeing the extremely rare Chequered Skipper Butterfly were soon forgotten. Lyca needed a walk and it was a new place for Wendy, so we stuck to the plan. We stopped at the Visitor Centre, which is nowhere near the reserve, 1st just to put in some time in case the weather improved. The Centre has a bunkhouse upstairs, where you can stay with a café downstairs plus a gift shop according to the sign on the front. We ventured inside and had a look around the old barn type building and found the gift shop. It was full of hand knitted clothing which can at best be describe as 'itchy' and 'scratchy' and apart from a few other bits and bobs and a knitting/sewing shop and small local History section right at the back there wasn't much else. I half heartedly looked in the glass cabinet but strangely found it quite interesting as it was about the mineral Strontianite which was first discovered in the mines a bit further inland. All the bits on show were found in the spoil heaps from the old mines so I thought I'd have a look later in the week to see if I could find my own! Ha.



Strontianite

We wandered through to the café, where there was a woman serving and a couple of tables with people sitting drinking tea and eating cake. The cake bit was the part that interested me, so we went to the counter for a look. I eventually settled on the chocolate brownie and we made a quick exit back to the car. The whole place was like travelling back in time and how I imagined a Visitor's Centre was like in the early 80's. What a strange place! Back at the car I saved the cake for later and drove up the road to the car park.

When we got to the car park it was already 3.02pm and we set off down the footpath in the woods. I took Wendy on the same route I'd gone on, along the riverside path and then back through the woods seeing as this was the way the book said to do it (excluding the wrong turn to the ford!). It didn't look ½ as nice without the sun shining like it had been on our 1st night and I just wished she'd been there to see it at its best.



Ariundle

When we got to the section where I'd had the Fritillaries we stopped for a scan but there was nothing, nor were there any Dragonflies either. Without the vital ingredient called the sun somewhere that had been so alive just a few days ago was totally dead.



River

We plodded along, going through the motions and the conversation turned to ticks. It looked great for them with all the long grass and bracken and I commented that it was the ideal location for a tick-fest. I don't know if there's such a thing but we think we ended up catching Strontianitis because in our boredom we were trying to decide who the line up for Tick-Fest was going to be. We particularly liked Ticky Martin, Tick Astley, Tick Hucknell and surely Tick Jagger would be headlining? It didn't stop at just ticks either and was open to any blood sucking critter so the main acts included Fleam Gallagher, Manic Street Leeches, Bombay Licicle Club and Electric Lice Orchestra as well as a totally over looked Gnat King Cole, who was signed up as a last minute gem courtesy of Andy :P. Oh dear! What with skating on the floor and now this we started to worry about our sanity, so the weather needed to improve quickly before we lost it completely! We did the entire walk without seeing a single thing but we'd definitely had more than a few laughs and Lyca had enjoyed herself.



Sniffing

We just hoped that there wasn't already enough ticks in her coat for Tick-Fest to kick off later :P.

Back at the car it was 4.20pm and yet again we'd dodged the worst of the rain and had only felt a few spots on our walk. I cracked open the chocolate brownie and Wendy broke a tiny piece off just to try it. We have to say that we were very impressed and the woman at the Visitor Centre certainly knew how to make a perfect brownie. After that I was stuffed and thought that we should take a spin up to Pollach Road, where we planned to go at night to at least give it a shot for Pine Marten and Wildcat.

Not surprisingly Pollach Road was long, single track and very bumpy, so Lyca wasn't very happy in the back. I was starting to realise that she really doesn't like being in a car driving at under 30mph, so the horribly claustrophobic single track roads and the constant braking were the worst scenario for her. We weren't particularly enjoying travelling on the roads either but luckily the scenery was quite nice. We climbed up the steep hill and looked down the valley through the greyness, wishing that the sun would come out. I wanted to find the old mines and when I spotted a gate I pulled in for a look.



Is this the mine?

A barbed wire fence surrounded the whole area and even the gate had it on top too but I reckoned I could get through it somewhere and got out to investigate. Wendy told me I was being ridiculous but I wanted to find the mine although it looked like it'd be quite a walk to get to it. I couldn't see it from the road and what lay before me was just a mess of waste ground covered in rocks and boulders. I changed my mind in the end and drove off only to find the real entrance to the mines a bit further up.....Doh! This was more like it and there were old vehicles and machinery scattered around looking suitably messy. I reckoned I could get down to them no problem but quickly lost the will and got back into the car.



The real mine

I was a bit confused as to how the people had been able to search through the spoil heaps in the 70's and 80's so when I googled it later I found out that the mines were closed in the late 1800's but were reopened in the mid 1980's when a new company tried to use new techniques to get more out. It didn't work and it closed again soon after. That explained the barbed wire and modernish machinery that was sitting about!!

We were back at HQ at 4.58pm and Wendy gave Lyca her tea before we set about making ours. After that she went off for a bath before settling down on the settee to watch TV. Lyca had been sleeping since after her tea and when Wendy sat down she snuggled into her and started to snore. Wendy was stroking her and found a hard thing in her fur, which she just pulled out like a piece of sand or something. When she looked at it she saw that it was a dead tick.....Bleurrghhhh! She carried on searching through her fur to check for more before Tick-Fest kicked off! She found another one still attached to her but on closer inspection, fortunately it was also dead. She got me to go and get the tick removers but try as she might it just wouldn't come off! Because it was dead it's body was flat and there was nothing to grip onto, so it just slid through the gap.....Grrrrrrr! I had a go but by that point Lyca had started to get very narky at all the poking and prodding and in the end we couldn't get near it and had to give up. Her tick count was now on 4 and they'd all been dead, so at least we knew her tick treatment was working. She was after all a living tick killing machine.....Mwahahah! We dreaded to think how many more were in that wooly coat of hers but she'd had enough and it'd have to wait until tomorrow. It absolutely threw it down with rain all evening but it eventually cleared up at 9.45pm, so I went out with a jam sarnie and set the camera trap up again. By 10.30pm we thought we'd better get some sleep as we had an early start in

the morning. It had forecast rain overnight though so yet again there was no chance to get the moth trap out :(.

Wednesday 29th June

It was 7am when we finally got up and Wendy had already checked out of the French windows to see if the jam sarnie was still there at 6.45am. It'd gone, so with high hopes I went out to get the camera in but looking at the footage it was still there at 5.22am and the camera hadn't caught whatever had taken it, which was very odd. Was a Pine Marten really too much to ask for on my 40th Birthday? It wasn't like I was asking for much and I only had a small wish list for the day which looked like this:

- 1) Pine Marten on camera again
- 2) Nice weather
- 3) Otter
- 4) Golden and/or White-tailed Eagle
- 5) Marsh Fritillary (if I was feeling greedy) :)

I'd already failed to get Pine Marten and it was raining and grey out, so that was 2 things scrubbed off my list instantly :(I'd seen the forecast a while back so had put all my eggs in one basket and had decided we'd do this holiday's 'mini adventure' and planned to go to Mull on the Wednesday, as it was the best forecast of the week. Wendy had informed me then that it was also my Birthday, which had been a nice coincidence because I was convinced that my Birthday was on Thursday.....Whoops hahah! Wendy came into the kitchen with a suspicious looking grin on her face and plonked some cards in front of me plus something wrapped in kitchen roll and string. I opened my cards from my Mum and Dad, Wendy's Mum and Wendy and Lyca, which were all very funny, then Wendy asked if I was going to open my present. I looked suspiciously at the small 'inventively' wrapped package and opened it up to find.....a Moshi Monster keyring! Woo hoo, just what I'd always wanted.....not! It had an evil face too, so I was lost for words :P. It wasn't the only present I was getting from her though because she owed me from when I paid for our holiday to Dumfries and Galloway for her 40th all those years ago (I'm a lot younger than Wendy :P) While we were getting ready Wendy had another check of Lyca for ticks and the one from the night before was still there BUT she found another one too.....Aarrghhhhhh! That put her tick count at 5! By the time we were ready to go out the sun had put in an appearance but with that so had the midgies.....!

We left at 8.39am and headed off to catch the Ferry to Mull, which we'd both been really looking forward to since we'd been away (Mull that is, not the ferry!) To get to Lochaline we had to drive round Loch Sunart then right across the mass of Morven. My Sat Nav reckoned this was about a 45mins drive so I was very paranoid about it being wrong and us missing the ferry! Driving round Loch Sunart I spotted a Red Deer close to the road down by the side of a Loch, so I stopped to get a quick point and click photo as it was way too close to use my proper camera.



Red Deer

When we finally arrived at the Lochaline Ferry terminal there were a few cars already parked up waiting, so I joined the queue.



Rush hour?

Wendy ran over to the toilets before we left and took some pics of the Ferry coming in.



Ferry

We sat there daydreaming about how all we wanted was for the sun to come out for a bit, so we could find some interesting Butterflies in the places I'd bookmarked but it wasn't looking good : . We also desperately wanted to see an Otter and some Eagles but in reality we reckoned it was going to throw it down all day and we'd see nothing. We'd chosen the west coast of Scotland because we knew it was the best place to see these things without travelling out to the Hebs but so far it'd let us down big time. We boarded the Ferry at 9.47am and paid for our £23 return ticket and set off 4 minutes later leaving a few cars behind to get the next sailing. The crossing was so smooth you wouldn't have known you were on a boat and I went for a look outside but the top deck was full so I stood on the stairs.



Smooth

Wendy went next and shortly after we arrived at Fishnish at 10.04am, so the whole crossing had taken just 7 minutes. We drove off and went through Craigmor, which was really busy and much more civilized than Strontian, which being on Mull surprised us. We headed off to our 1st stop, which was 10 miles away admiring the scenery as we went, already very impressed with the Island. Unbelievably the sun appeared, which made everywhere look amazing and we already wanted to go back even though we'd

just arrived! Even the roads were a joy to drive on after suffering the horrendous Ardnamurchan roads for the past few days. This was an odd feeling as they were also single-track roads but like back in the Isle of man you don't feel like you are dicing with death approaching every corner!

When we arrived at Grass Point I parked up and we all took a wander down to the rocks to look around. Grass point is a small peninsula that juts out at the entrance to the sea loch Loch Don. We scanned for Eagles and Otters without any joy but we were in the best place we could be, so had to keep our hopes up.



Loch Don

After a while I spotted a blob sitting on the rocks on the other side of the bay and although it was most probably a White-tailed Eagle it was much too far away to say for sure. There were a couple of what looked like Holiday Cottages facing out over the bay and a couple of people sitting outside in the sun with bins.



Grass Point

What a perfect spot! They must've seen Eagles from their from garden and even Otters, maybe we should rent it out next year? It was a lovely place but we didn't have all day,

so we headed back to the car and spotted a Butterfly. It was only a Common Blue but it was start and at least we knew they were on the wing for a change! Back at the car it was 11am and I looked up to see what appeared to be a huge raptor high in the sky and I pointed it out to Wendy. Wendy kept saying that it was just a Buzzard but I wasn't having that, I so wanted it to be an Eagle! In the end I had to agree with her, especially when she said the exact same thing had caught her out earlier. It'd been so long since we'd seen an Eagle that our perspective of their sheer size needed a reboot and that wasn't going to happen unless we actually saw one in the flesh.

Driving to our next stop we passed loads of cyclists, so it must be a popular destination for cyclists and luckily the weather was staying fine for them. At 11.15am we arrived at a field I'd found out about, which was good for Marsh Fritillary. I'd pinpointed a place to park using google maps and using a combo of that and online maps I'd found a track that went near the marshy bog area that I'd noticed people mention on Marsh Fritillary photos. It was a long shot but worth a go. When we got out of the car the air was filled by the sound of Grasshoppers but the area looked great. We went through a gate into the field and made our way up a little path trodden into the grass with our eyes peeled for any insects.



Flusher dog

Wendy started looking further afield and was fixed on something miles away next to an outlet in a field that she reckoned looked like an Otter. I got onto it but it wasn't moving, so it was impossible to say what it was, although I could see where she was coming from. We carried on and hit a really boggy section and had to skirt around it as best we could. To top it off we then started to get pestered by horseflies.....Arrghhhh! Wendy was still suffering from wishful thinking and kept looking back at her 'thing' in desperation. She then noticed that there were a few Hoodies down in the fields as well and when I spotted the thing finally move it turned out to be a Hoody too.....Hahaha! There were loads of Moths flying around in the grass, which were mainly all Chimney sweepers and grass moths but then I spotted something else. It was a Butterfly, which I was quite excited about because I realized the habitat was good for Large Heath and this wasn't just a Meadow Brown. It was impossible to get a good look of it as it flew past and it didn't settle, so we lost it. Next I spotted a Fritillary!! Adrenaline was pumping but as usual with Fritillaries it was flying really fast over the grass and unfortunately from what we could gather it was a **Dark Green Fritillary**, which was new for the trip but not what we were after as we get them at home. A Four-spotted Chaser zoomed past and then we found out why when we hit a really boggy section of the path. I tried to go

around it but the ground wasn't dry anywhere, so had to use the tufts of grass as steppingstones to get across.



Uh oh!

Wendy wasn't particularly pleased and was edging towards a Karl Pilkington strop.....not bad since we were 1 ½ weeks into our holiday and she was doing very well! :P All I wanted to do was give finding a Marsh Fritillary my best shot, so I wasn't going to give up at the 1st hurdle. Wendy reluctantly followed me and we carried on for a while without seeing anything else so I decided to turn back even though the scenery was very nice.



Perfect Marsh Fritillary habitat

Just after we turned back we heard the call of a raptor and looked around to see a female **Hen Harrier** over the field to our left. We watched it floating over the long grass, calling as it went until it landed on a mound, where it stayed. We carried on retracing our steps back hoping for a 2nd chance at the section, which had been the best for Butterflies, as this was our last chance for Marsh Frit. We couldn't find any Marsh Frits but I did spot the odd Heath type Butterfly again. I reckoned it could well have been a Large Heath, which would be a lifer so just as exciting as a Marsh frit although not quite as smart

looking. Wendy checked her app to compare it with Meadow Brown and Small Heath, as they all look really similar but it was too hard to tell. I got a quick record shot hoping that we could ID it later. I was adamant it was a Large Heath (even down to the sub species!) and got the final confirmation when I showed it to Andy when he was over in August and confirmed **Large Heath**.....Woo!



Large Heath

Something then caught Wendy's eye and she looked up and said, "What's that.....?" "Eagle!" I stopped what I was doing and looked up at the sky to see the bird flying off. We both watched it for a while but then Wendy said, "It's a White-tailed isn't it?" I managed to get enough of a view of it to confirm that it was indeed a **White-tailed Eagle** :). Wendy then found another flying really high over the mountains in the distance but it was so far away there was no way we were ID'ing that! At least I'd seen one of the things off my Birthday list by the time we were back at the car at 12.08pm. Shame the sun never really came out properly but you can't have everything!

We needed to go somewhere to eat our lunch and I had just the place in mind, an Eagle watch point in the hills not too far away. We set off and shortly after Wendy spotted a male Harrier hunting over a field near to where the female had landed, so I pulled over and we watched it until it went behind a hill and we carried on. We passed a parked up Wildlife Tour bus and could only imagine that they probably had an Eagle flying over them, which had just been sitting on the bonnet tap dancing for them.....Grrrrrrr! We were now in a much more mountainous terrain and it was starting to look more like Eagle territory. I spotted a huge bird being mobbed high up over a mountain, so I pulled over by Inverlussa Mussel Farm and didn't even need to raise my bins to see what it was. This bird was a **Golden Eagle** and not only that but it was being mobbed by what Wendy initially thought was a Sparrowhawk. We watched them for a while and then I realized that it was actually a pair of Hen Harriers! Who'd have thought it? The size difference was just unbelievable, so I jumped out of the car with my camera and got a quick record shot.



Wow!

We'd now seen both types of Eagle and more Hen Harriers than we'd seen on the Isle of Man so far that year!

We got to the viewpoint looking over Loch an Ellen at 12.29pm but the black clouds started to roll on and the rain started. This was a shame as we could tell the view from here would be stunning in sunlight!



Would be amazing in sunlight!

This didn't seem to be putting the cyclists who were peddling their way towards us off though. Rather them than me! We had our lunch while scanning for Eagles but we saw nothing apart from horrible weather, so we didn't stick around. When we noticed 2 blokes with big lenses standing at the side of the road looking up I pulled over for a scan. Wendy spotted what they were looking at, it was another Golden Eagle and even though it was too high for any shots it was still a brilliant sight.

Our next stop was Loch Beg, the book mentioned it was good for Otter and Dipper so 1st we wanted to check the bridge. The sun was out again and we wandered over to the bridge and peered over the side.



View from the bridge

Disappointingly there was absolutely no sign of any Dipper, so we turned round and went back to the car. Another car with bird/wildlife related window stickers all over the rear window pulled up and an old bloke got out with bins. Over the road we found yet another Hen Harrier floating over the fields and we all stood watching it. After it'd gone I carried on down the road to find a layby where we could view the Loch from. I pulled into one and we scanned the vast stretch of water in front of us but all we could pull out was the tiny speck of a Diver Wendy had found. It was so far off we couldn't tell which type it was, so I drove further round to see if we could get closer to ID it. There was a Tours Bus parked up with loads of people standing around drinking tea out of flasks and eating packed lunches, so it wasn't looking hopeful that there was anything eventful happening.



Tour group at Loch Beg

When we looked again the Diver had vanished, so Wendy started to try and re-find it while I looked around. All of a sudden I saw something in the water, which had me doubting myself for a few seconds. I had to make sure I was right before I called it to Wendy, so after my brain had caught up with my eyes and finally believed what it was seeing I blurted out, "**Otter!**" Wendy went into hyper mode and her heart was racing, as

I tried to get her onto it. Luckily the Otter popped up again and was definitely heading towards us, so all we had to do was wait. It was brilliant to watch it swimming and then diving underwater with the tip of its tail slowly slipping under the surface. Wendy was really hoping to see it haul out onto the rocks like you see on TV and when it started to swim towards a rock her heart was in her mouth. We watched it swim up to the rock and get out where it had a good old shake but then got straight back into the water.....Booooooooooooo :(It then carried on swimming over towards an island nearer to the tour group and when it dived again I saw this as my cue to get out and try and get closer to it for some shots as it was too far out in the Loch to attempt any from the roadside. I grabbed my gear, crouched over and started to run down towards the waters edge. About half way down I was pondering over how well I was doing with my field craft when all of a sudden my foot slipped and I headed for a massive decking. As I stumbled with all my heavy gear I somehow managed to get my big lens down and use it to save my fall.....Phew! Panic over I looked down to find that I'd only gone and put my foot right in the middle of the biggest wettest cow pat I'd ever seen and not only that but that's what I'd slammed my lens into as well. The end and camo neoprene cover were now caked in soaking cow poo! One day I'll go away and actually manage to have a holiday where I don't get covered in sh**! I quickly wiped as much of the poo off my foot, ankle and lens as I could but I wasn't going to give up so I carried on, stopping every time it popped up until I was right at the edge and couldn't get any closer. Luckily the tours group had noticed that something was going on and were watching it too. Who knows how long they'd been waiting and for once we felt very lucky to have just turned up and got an instant Otter :). Wendy was still in the car watching intently with her fingers crossed, as it headed closer and closer to the island on the other side of the inlet. Eventually it hauled out and started to roll around and groom itself, which was exactly what she'd been so desperate to see. It did this for ages, so I managed to fire off loads of shots. Unfortunately it was just a bit too far away for anything remotely decent and eventually it looked as though it was taking a rather long nap, so I gave up and went back to the car.



Otter

When Wendy asked how I'd got on I had a bit of a moan about not getting any decent photos but at the end of day I couldn't complain. I'd wanted to stay on the west coast

especially to see Otters and having practically given up after failing so far we had just seen one.....Happy Days. Or should that be Happy Birthday? :).

By then we'd started to wonder if we were staying in the wrong place and within just a few hours of being on Mull we were already blown away. Even the roads were better, although just as narrow as on Ardnamurchan. Sadly we knew that there were loads of places that we wouldn't have time to explore either, including the entire north half of the island, which was a real shame. If we'd stayed on Mull for the week we could've done Ardnamurchan in a day trip instead of the other way round.....Doh! We didn't have time to sit about contemplating, so we set off to our next stop to Loch na Keal, which was where my Mum and Dad had stayed and had seen Otter and Eagles from the cottage.

The drive there was very scenic and thankfully the sun was still shining, which made it all even better. We drove down a steep road with cliffs on our right and the sea on our left. We hit a bit of a traffic jam and had to stop to let a herd of cows with their calves past, which was slightly out of the ordinary and far less stressful than cars :).



Moooooooooooo

We then saw a bird flying over the road ahead of us, which after flashing its white rump was very obviously a **Wheatear**. A bit further on and there was another and we'd seemingly hit Wheatear central, as by the time we'd got the bottom of the road we'd clocked up 11 in total! The Wheatear sightings fizzled out and the road took us alongside the sea where we had our 1st **Shag** and **Shelduck** of the trip and some stunning views.



Very nice

As I drove back inland we came across some sheep that had made a bid for freedom and escaped from their field. The Farmer, who was out trying to herd them back on a quad bike, was armed with not 1 but 7 sheep dogs! We can't imagine the sheep were out running riot for very long with that lot on the case. I'd pinpointed a walk nearby, which led up the valley to an inland Loch but I couldn't work out where the footpath was or where to park. I was a bit disappointed by this as this was the only place I'd worked out that we could have a bit of a walk in the time we had left. I quickly checked the OS map and thought we could park on the far side of the loch and maybe have a walk around there somewhere. Driving past Killichronan Campsite I pulled over so that Wendy could grab a quick pic of the view over the Loch.



Loch na Keal

Loch na Keal was certainly a nice place and it definitely looked good for both Otter and Eagles. We got out and wandered down the road at the side of the Loch and heard a blast of song from our 1st **Sedge Warbler** of the trip. We stopped to see if it'd put in an appearance, which it did briefly, so I didn't get any decent shots of it. We carried on walking down the road scanning the Loch hoping for another Otter fix but saw nothing.....Boooooooo :(I turned my attention to the sky and noticed a huge bird

over one of the hills, so I gave it another look. It was definitely another Eagle and when it banked over we had a good view of it's white tail and were pleased to be watching an adult White-tailed Eagle.



White-tailed eagle

Neither of us had seen an adult before, so it was great to see especially in such amazing surroundings. Eventually it disappeared behind the hills, so we headed down to the beach where Lyca was pulling like a tram horse to go for a paddle. There were a few dead jellyfish on the sand, so Wendy was careful to check the water before letting her in, as we didn't really need any drama while we were on Mull! When we thought Lyca had paddled enough Wendy tried to lead her out but she had other ideas. She wouldn't budge and just stood there staring at us with a defiant look on her face.....Grrrrrr!



I'm not getting out!

She eventually admitted defeat and slowly tore herself away from the water and we headed back up the beach and down the road to another nice spot. We went down and sat on some rocks to take in the view and Wendy had another of her 'stop the clock' moments and Lyca seemed to be joining in too!



Taking in the view

It's a good job Wendy can't stop time because she'd still be there now or maybe she'd still be sitting on her rock at Loch Garten in 2012 and none of this holiday would've happened yet! Aarrghhhh! Normally I just roll my eyes when Wendy has her hippy moments but even I had to admit that the views there were something else!



And relax

There were Common Sands everywhere and a Dark Green Fritillary flew past so quickly it was gone in seconds. Although Wendy could've stayed there forever we had to get going and start making our way back to the ferry at Fishnish. However much we loved Mull I really didn't want to end up turning up for the last ferry and finding it full, so we couldn't get back to HQ.

Back at the car it was 3.44pm and a black 4x4 with Sea Shepherd written all over it parked up nearby. In case you were wondering Sea Shepherd is an international non-profit marine wildlife conservation organization, which was set up in 1977 and do a much better job than Greenpeace.



Modern day heros!

The doors opened and a young couple of Scandinavian looking Goths got out with a bag of bread. They both had waist length blonder than blond hair, facial piercings, Dr Marten boots and were dressed head to toe in various layers of black topped off with black leather jackets, so they must've been boiling! They wandered down to the beach and stood there clutching the bag of bread. We don't know if they were actually anything to do with Sea Shepherd but they looked the part at least but we're not sure what they planned on feeding with the bread though.

We set off with my plan being to catch the 4.45pm ferry home, so we had a bit of time on our hands. I stopped off in Salen, so Wendy could nip into the Spa to get some bits we couldn't get back in Strontian. I thought the area looked like a right dump and their were some right "characters" outside but Wendy came back happy as the shop was way better than on the mainland! She also thought that the woman who served her was having a bit of a joke (on her) because she couldn't understand a word she was saying.

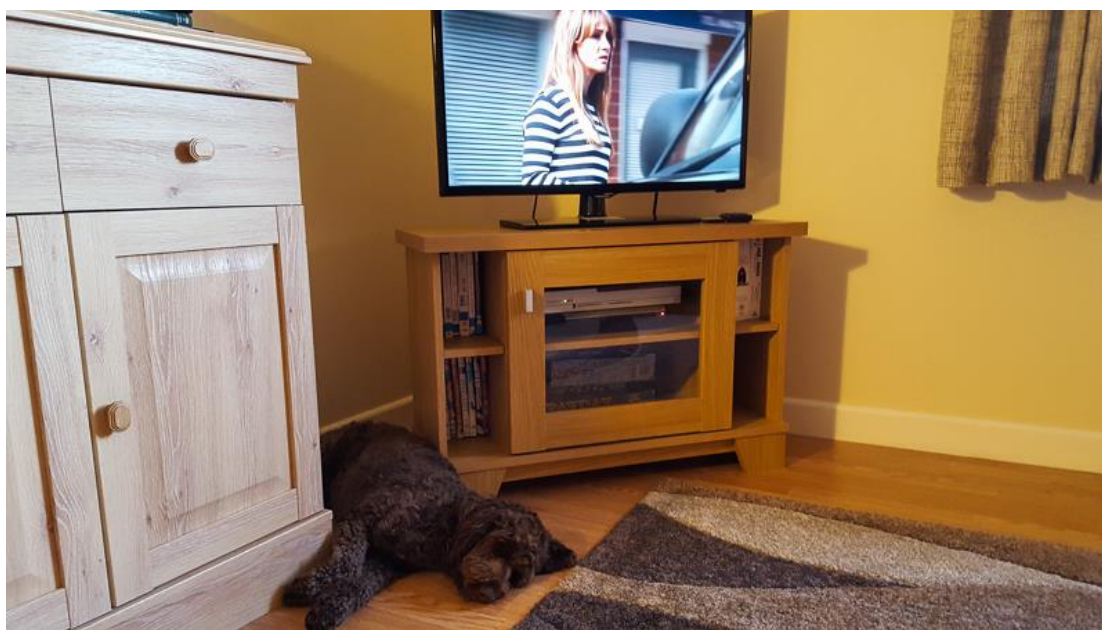
We arrived back at Fishnish at 4.11pm and were the 11th car in the queue, so my theory of getting an earlier ferry seemed to have been spot on. We thought we were way too early but I'd got the times wrong and the ferry was already on its way over.



Homeward bound :(

Just 4 cars got off and we drove straight on and left at 4.25pm! It was a good job we'd been early or we'd have been too far back in the queue and wouldn't have got on! The short crossing was again so calm you wouldn't have known you were on a ferry in the sea at all and we docked back at Lochaline at 4.41pm. As we drove off the 1st thing we noticed was a static caravan and that the sky was grey and overcast, so we knew we were back on home turf :P.

What an amazing 40th Birthday I'd just had though and I'd got a lot of the things I'd hoped for! We'd seen 2x Golden and 2x White-tailed Eagles, an Otter, a Large Heath Butterfly AND the weather had been the best it'd been all week, although still not perfect :P. After travelling over the deceptively long Morven section I stopped off at Strontian petrol station and Wendy ran in for some milk and we were back at HQ at 5.21pm. Amazingly the sun had come out there as well by then but we were starving and set about making our tea. Wendy showed me the new tick removers she'd bought from the petrol station and said that the bloke who'd served her told her that everyone was complaining about the amount of ticks around. Apparently it was mainly dog owners who'd noticed their dogs being covered in them, so it wasn't just Lyca! How we'd got away with not getting any on us is anyone's guess.....maybe they just prefer dogs or maybe Smidge was working well with ticks as well? After tea I complained that I wanted some cake and we didn't have any but Wendy just looked at me and started to shake her head. Unbeknown to me she'd bought me a lemon cake from the Spa on Mull to surprise me with on my Birthday and I'd just gone and ruined it.....Oooooops! After that we had our baths and settled down to relax for the rest of the evening. Lyca decided to sleep in a bit of a random place between the sideboard and TV but it seemed to fit the bill....for a while.



Zzzzzzzzz

While I was stroking Lyca later on I found another tick on the top of her head, so Wendy ran off to get the new removers to test out. This one came off a treat, as it was still alive and full of blood but that put her tick total at six! Yuk! The weather was hit and miss all evening and while it was sunny there were regular downpours to put a spanner in the works and prevent us from moth trapping again. We resigned ourselves to the fact that it wouldn't be possible and after putting the camera trap and jam sarnie out we headed off to bed, very tired, at 11.10pm.

Thursday 30th June

We didn't wake up until 8.30am but that was no great shame because it looked as though it was about to rain. We knew that yesterday was going to be hard to beat but this was an extreme come down. I let Lyca out for a wee and got the camera trap in and by 9am it was absolutely chucking it down, so we had no idea what we were going to do. Interesting the sarnies had gone so excitingly I looked at the camera footage. It was gutting and slightly odd to find that nothing had set the trap off all night.....Nooooo! Depressed we sat eating our breakfast watching the rain lashing down against the French windows but saw a nice male **Blackcap** in the trees. The Great spotted Woodpecker family had become regular visitors to our peanut feeder and we watched one of the juveniles stuffing its face really close.

It actually cleared up but we knew it was going to be short lived, so we took Lyca out for a wander over to the shop. The little row of shops was always a hive of activity and the café in particular seemed to be a hotspot for road tripping bikers. There were at least 30 with an average age of about 60 and their plates were from all over Europe too so god knows what motorbike club this was. This area was in effect the Town Centre of Strontian and even Wendy couldn't get lost getting to the shops there!



Town Centre

Seeing as it was still just about dry we walked down to the river to see if we could find a Dipper but there was nothing so we carried on down the road and had a look out over Loch Sunart.



Desperation

There was nothing about at all, so we headed back noticing the Swallows and House Martins feeding low over the gardens of the houses along the road. Another thing we noticed in the area was that it wasn't just Bramble Cottage that had a wildflower area. All the houses had an un-mown wildflower area somewhere in the garden, which we thought was just brilliant. It seemed to be just the norm there and something that the rest of us could well do with adopting. We could imagine that on sunny days they'd be alive with Butterflies but we weren't going to be around to see it that was for sure! Back at HQ Lyca had obviously got the measure of the day and curled up on the settee and was snoring loudly within minutes. It had started chucking down again so we had no motivation to go out at all and stayed in all morning doing very little. At lunch time we treated ourselves to a toastie for lunch again, which looked as though it would be the highlight of the day. We just wished there was a pub nearby that was dog friendly where we could go for some food later. We got the impression that the pub down the road was a bit too 'local' for our liking and also didn't take dogs either. We hadn't been out for food once since we'd gone away and it looked as though we'd be staying in for the rest of it too. After lunch while we waited for the weather to improve we resorted to playing skating on the laminate floor in the hall again, which gave us a bit of a laugh especially when Lyca joined in again.

Finally at 2.15pm the sun came out, so we quickly grabbed our stuff, bundled Lyca into the car and headed out. I reckoned that the 4 short walks around Salen were worth a shot and I also had a site at Salen to check for Northern Emerald that the Dragonfly bloke at Boat of Garten told me about. Although his directions were a bit vague, I think I'd worked out where he meant. Apparently it was up a track at the side of the road after the houses but wasn't sign posted and looked like it was private.... Hmmm. Salen was about 30 minutes west on the lethal roads so that wasn't the best to start with. I then drove straight past our 1st spot, so had to carry on until I found somewhere to turn round. Luckily that was handy because the site I'd been told about was supposedly on the same stretch of road so we could have a recce but we couldn't find anything that resembled the description I'd been given. Booo. When I found our 1st spot of Caman Torsa it turned out to be just a picnic area and no walk at all, so we went straight back to the car and carried on to the next stop. Approaching a junction to Strontian some idiot decided to turn in on the wrong side of the road..... Doh!

Arriving at our 2nd spot I parked up just in time for the heavens to open again.....Grrrrrrrr! I pulled my waterproof over trousers out of their bag and started to put them on while still sitting in the drivers seat. This had been tricky the 1st time

around at Sanna Bay but I was really struggling this time. Wendy found it hilarious and referring back to her funniest ever line about putting socks on said, "You put your toes in first." I laughed and said, "I'm struggling to find the other leg!" Wendy burst out laughing and said, "It's next to the other one!" Urrghhhhhh! After a lot of effort and stress I pulled the trousers up while Wendy rolled her eyes in disbelief that I was having so much trouble putting some trousers on at 40 years of age. I made the fateful error of blurting out, "I haven't always worn pants!" to which she couldn't resist saying, "Why, did you used to wear a skirt?" The tears of laughter were rolling down her face and Strontianitis was setting in again, so we really needed to get out and do something before it became more serious. Oh dear :P.

After all that palaver we set off into the woods at 3.22pm still hoping that the weather would improve. We crossed over a stream and then found that the path down to the Loch which was totally overgrown.



Stream

It was a really steep climb down to the Loch side as well and we really didn't fancy doing it in reverse, so we turned round and made our way back to the car. We did find a moth though which turned out to be a **Northern Spinach**. Back at the car park there was a picnic table, so we had a look down at the view over Loch Sunart, where we should've been.



Loch Sunart

It looked lovely but we'd just lost the will by that point. I drove up the road to find our next stop and by total fluke stumbled across the site I'd been told about! There was no point even trying there in the rain but we decided to give it a go tomorrow which would be our last day, so we really hoped the weather would be better. I found the next car park further up the road and parked up. We all bailed out again and followed the path inland. We came across a big pond that I didn't know was there but it looked great for Dragonflies if the sun was out!



Dragonfly pool

This had become the tag line for this holiday and, "If the sun was out" was a line that had been said too many times. By then we were just going through the motions and ticking off the places I'd bookmarked to visit from the Scotland book to say we'd been there, just in case we ever went back in the future. There was no point sticking around, so we headed straight back dodging loads of tiny baby **Toads** as we went. I noticed a dog off the lead heading towards us from behind us so we sped up in the hope it wouldn't catch up with us. We could do without Lyca having a freak out as she was already stressed on the Ardnamurchan roads. Luckily enough we got her bundled into the car just before the loose dog reached us.....Phew! We were now down to the last walk on the list of 4 and had all our hopes pinned on it to give Lyca a decent bit of exercise. When we found

it I jumped out of the car to go and have a recce but was gutted to find a sign saying, 'Steep! Can be muddy after rain!' I didn't even need to think about what to do next and decided that it was a nonstarter.

We were back at HQ at 4.21pm and it was still raining, so the entire day had been a bit of a mess really. It felt like such a waste of our holiday and we started to doubt that we'd be seeing anything else before we left on Saturday. After we'd had tea and baths we sat in the living room watching the rain out of the window. It was persistent alright and we didn't fancy living anywhere near Strontian! You can tell we hadn't done much during the day because we finally decided to turn in for the night at 11.40pm, which was unusually late for us. Wendy asked if we were putting a sarnie out for the Pine Marten but I was feeling particularly grumpy and replied with a stern "No!"

Friday 1st July

We woke up at 8.15am and the weather didn't seem to know what it was doing. One minute it was raining then it was sunny, then it was raining again.....repeat! Urrghhhhh! This was our last day too, so we'd been hoping all week that we'd get a break on the last day. Even just a few hours of unbroken sunlight would do so that we stood a better chance of finding the Dragonflies and Butterflies we'd gone all that way to see. While we were milling around I heard a loud roar and ran to the living room window just in time to see 2x F15 Strike Eagles whooshing really low over Loch Sunart.....Cool! That was probably going to be the only excitement of the day and Wendy was gutted that she missed it. She must've been getting desperate, as shortly after that she started to iron some of the clothes she'd washed to bring home! Normally there's no place for ironing on holiday but it kind of summed up our 2nd week really :(We watched the comings and goings from the feeders and pottered about until there was finally a break in the rain and a patch of blue sky. We didn't want to waste any slight window of opportunity it and headed out at 10.58am.

When I started my car I was surprised to hear a warning alarm and the display was telling me I was out of coolant.....Great timing! I seemed to remember this happening before and it turned out my car was lying to me, so I wasn't too concerned. We stopped at the shop to get some drinks and it started to rain again.....NOOOOOOO! Since we'd arrived in Strontian we couldn't help but notice that all the places we were going to or went past were managed by the Forestry Commission. They were doing such a good job and we wish we had a similar back at home rather than them just putting all their money into making mountain bike tracks and the likes. When we saw 2x large birds soaring high over a hill I pulled over so we could have a look. Typically they were just Buzzards, so I carried on. There was still no sign of any Otters around the Loch either even though they're meant to be a common sight according to all the literature we'd read! By then it was 12.5c (wow) and raining but the forecast had said it was going to be on and off all day, so it was going to be a case of dodging showers as best we could.

Driving along the horrible roads our senses, which were feeling pretty numb by then were suddenly woken up when some woman came bombing round a blind corner and up the hill towards me on a narrow single-track section. I slammed my brakes on but as I was going down hill it was taking a bit longer to slow down. I suddenly realized that she was making very little effort to brake at all and as we got close to hitting each other I could that see that she was angrily waving her hand at me, signaling me to stop! Errrr.....yes you mad cow that's exactly what I was doing. I had no choice but to swerve off the road and luckily it wasn't into a hedge but just a pile of long grass. She finally stopped, smack bang in the middle of the road, so if I hadn't swerved she would have hit us. Again she made several gestures at me to indicate that I was mental with a look on her face that could kill! We actually couldn't believe what we were seeing considering she'd been driving far too fast for a single track road and had made no effort to stop in the layby which she flew straight past as a consequence.....Grrrrrr! I was in a state of

shock really as we'd just come close to being involved in a crash but luckily the shock had subdued the road rage that I should've been entitled to from her horrific driving. I backed out of the grass and bounced past her while she sat in the middle of the road glaring at me like I'd just brutally murdered her entire family gesticulating again that I was mental but it was her who had the problem not me! Cheeky *****! She must've been having an extremely bad day but it did seem at times as though some of the locals thought they owned the roads, which felt just as hostile as their diabolical weather! I carried on in disbelief of what'd just happened longing to be driving on normal roads again.

We finally parked up at the car park for RSPB Glenborrodale at 11.47am. I think this is the most westerly RSPB reserve in mainland Britain and it felt a really odd place for the RSPB to have although it was a special habitat. This was an area of very rare habitat of Ancient Atlantic Woodland and boasted Chequered Skipper, Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Northern Emerald, Wood Warbler, Redstart, Golden Eagle and Ring Ouzels up on the tops. There was supposedly a path but we couldn't see it from the small car park, which wasn't the best start. We got out of the car and ultimately found an info board with directions to the reserve. We had to walk up the road, which was steep until we came to yet another steep and muddy uphill footpath, which wasn't what we'd had in mind. We were sick to death of hilly walks but we were in the wrong part of the world to go anywhere flat, so we set off on our climb upwards.



Going up....again

The area was amazing but we couldn't understand how it was so quiet. We were in ancient Atlantic coast woodland, with a stream running through it but we didn't hear a single squeak of a bird until we'd reached the top of the hill. The squeak was from a Blue Tit and as we carried on we realized that there were loads of fledgling Blue Tits all around us. There was nothing else though until a Redpoll flew overhead, as we climbed up and then down the slippery, muddy, rocky path. Something caught my eye on the path ahead and I looked down to see a Lizard. Wendy came over for a look and noticed that it was very fat and looked like it was pregnant, Lyca had a sniff of it but left it alone.



Lizard

When we got to the top we came out of the woods and noticed that the rain had stopped so scanned the craggy rock face for Ring Ouzel but there was no sign. It looked good though, so maybe we'd have had more of a chance if we'd been there earlier in the breeding season?



Potential

We carried on down a little slope and I spotted a Dragonfly, which was a blue one that didn't hang around for me to ID but was likely to be another Common Hawker. Next we had a Golden-ringed Dragonfly flying around really close to us putting on a good show. Considering we'd started the holiday having never seen one before and had now seen a few, we couldn't grumble at that at all:). The fact that we were seeing Dragonflies so soon made sense when we reached a bog pool, so it was perfect habitat for them.



Bog pool

Obviously with there being a bog pool it meant that the ground had become boggy too, so we squelched our way through it until we came to a very convenient boardwalk that helped us keep our boots out of the upland bog area that we were now in.



Upland bog

There was a Fritillary flying around and when it landed on some thistles I grabbed a quick shot to ID it later.



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary

The sun had come out again, so with it came Midgies and Horseflies, so every now and again we would stop to warn each other that a Horsefly had just landed on us and we were just about to get a sharp slap.....Hahahahaha! There'd been so much more going on after the rain had stopped we just wished we'd had better weather for all the walk. There was finally more bird song including a Whitethroat singing nearby and Wendy found some weird poo on the boardwalk, which was possibly Pine Marten.

Finally we were back in the woods and heading down hill, so we knew we were on the home stretch. The Woodland was now ancient Birch and the fallen trees and ground were covered in so many different types of mosses and ferns, you could easily spend a week studying them!



Ancient Woodland

It was probably amazing for insects too but it had started to rain AGAIN, so we couldn't get back quick enough. Our walk was suddenly made difficult when the boardwalk

randomly ended right at a crucial point where there was an area of deep mud.....Grrrrrrrr! There was no easy way around it either but we had no option than to try and use the very edges and hope for the best. Before we could stop her, Lyca just walked straight through the middle of it all and was knee deep in mud, making squelching noises as she went.....Aarrghhhhh! Her legs were black by the time she made it to the other side, so that meant she'd be going in the bath when we got home. We skirted around the edge and luckily managed to avoid the worst of it but we couldn't help but wonder who's brainstorm it had been to end the boardwalk there! Eventually we came out of the woods and found ourselves back on the road where it became apparent that it was pretty windy. This could only mean one thing and that was that it was going to chuck it down again, so we upped the pace to try and get back to the car before it got too bad.



Grey view

Unfortunately the heavens opened shortly after that and the walk back was much longer than we'd bargained on. By the time we got to the car at 1.15pm we looked as though we'd just been for a swim fully clothed and neither of us could see out of our glasses. After putting a very muddy and wet Lyca in the back the 1st thing we did was dry everything off as best we could. I then realized that in our hurry we'd forgotten to pick the poo bag up from the start of the walk but decided to wait in the hope that the rain would ease off before going out to get it. We ate our lunch in the steamed up car and eventually the rain became lighter, so I went out to get the poo bag, which I had no choice other than to put in the boot until we found a bin. That was another thing we'd noticed about the area and apart from not having caught up with the tourism industry it also didn't seem to know about the invention of dog poo bins! With it being our last day we had to make a decision about what to do next and I quickly decided to grab the bull by the horns and try and find the track I'd been told about for a last ditch attempt for Northern Emerald. Our luck was entirely in the hands of the weather and all we needed was a break in the rain and clouds to give us a chance.

When we arrived at the layby at Salen it was 1.51pm and unbelievably the sun had come out, so we didn't waste any time hanging about! Looking up the track we could see that it split off in 2 directions and we had no idea which way to go. There was a house being built on the right, so we took an uneducated guess that we should take the left hand path.



Which way?

We set off up a very steep and rocky path with the sun beating down on us feeling pretty tired and hot by then. I couldn't help but feel disheartened at the fact that we were in the right place, the conditions were spot on but typically there was nothing about! Wendy spotted a Moth flying, so we followed it until it landed and I grabbed a record shot. It was a nice **Purple Bar**, which we hadn't seen for ages, so at least we'd found one interesting thing for our efforts!



Purple Bar

Next we went through a gate and sighed at the sight of the steep hill before us feeling totally knackered already. The track was a steep climb that skirted a conifer plantation on the right but opened out to bracken and upland bog further up.



Up we go again

We certainly wouldn't miss all the hilly walks when we left, that was for sure! Further up I saw a small Butterfly and when it landed we got it in our bins for a better look. It had its wings closed, so we could only see its underside but when it eventually opened them we could see more detail. It was brown with an orange spot at the top of its forewing, so we started to get a bit excited. I handed Lyca over to Wendy and went over with my camera while she checked the Butterfly app on her phone. I was really hoping for Northern Brown Argus (which would be a lifer), so I fired off as many shots as I could while it was feeding. Looking at them the blue speckling on the wings was more obvious, which told us that it was just a Common Blue :{.



Common Blue

Further up we passed a plantation with a huge bank covered in Foxgloves, which looked lovely in the sunshine.



Very summery

At the top of the hill we found a boggy peaty stream and looked around for any signs of Dragonflies. It looked like a great area and the sun was just about hanging in there but we had no such luck.



Salen walk

After that we decided to knock it on the head and turned back knowing that if we didn't find a Northern Emerald on the return journey then we never would. We passed a Heath Fragrant Orchid and Wendy couldn't resist putting her nose up to it for a sniff to see if it actually lived up to its name.



Heath Fragrant Orchid

She didn't really know why she was surprised to find that it did and assured me that it smelled lovely. I definitely wasn't going to be seen by anyone doing anything remotely as poncy as smelling a flower! We came across another Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and stopped so I could try any better any of my existing shots but I failed miserably! While I was doing that Wendy was standing around with Lyca who was sniffing about and she noticed that in a tiny puddle at the side of the path there were some **Tadpoles**. It can't have been more than 1cm deep so she wondered how on earth they'd survive.



Not really where you'd expect to find Tadpoles

Then again if it continued to rain as much as it had been doing they'd probably be fine! All of a sudden my heart nearly leapt out of my chest when I spotted a Dragonfly out of the corner of my eye :O! Was it a last minute Northern Emerald to make the visit worth our while? When I pinned it down my heart sank when I realized that it was just a Common Darter but a larger one flew past with something in its mouth, which was going so fast I couldn't see any details. It completely disappeared so we had no hope of tracking it down. That one was probably our Northern Emerald but we'll never know :(.

We saw nothing else of note all the way down to the bottom of the path and instead of going straight back to the car we thought we'd investigate the right hand path instead. We wandered up towards the house and straight away we discovered some boggy pools at the side of the track.



Trackside pools

Had this been where we were supposed to have been looking at all along? We had a sneaking suspicion that it was and that we'd just walked up the massive and steep hill for nothing! Even if they were there was no sign of any Dragonflies around them and further up we came across a 'Private Property' sign, so we gave up. Clutching at straws we hung around at the bottom for a while but there was still nothing, so we called it a day.

Back at the car the wind was picking up again and it was already 3.10pm so Wendy cracked open the Boost bar she'd bought earlier as a consolation prize. It was 16c by then but not wanting to be defeated I reckoned that Claish Moss was worth another visit as it was hotter than it had been and the sun kept making an appearance.

When we arrived at Claish Moss it was 3.22pm and unbelievably it was raining. So we sat in the car crossing our fingers and toes that it would pass. Eight minutes later and the sun came out again, so we bailed out and set off up the path with the distinct feeling that we were wasting our time.



Claish Moss

It was too early to go back to HQ and we didn't have any more places left to visit, so it was worth a last shot. Walking up the track through the woods the sky was black with Hawthorn Flies and there were Common Darters everywhere we looked. This was more like it! Things were on the wing, so I suggested doing the walk to the pool. We were nearly getting struck in the head by the Darters and Hawthorn Flies but try as we might we couldn't pick an Emerald out. In a way this was worse than having nothing flying as I was positive that if there were Emeralds there they'd be flying with everything else. Maybe we were looking in the wrong place and should have been concentrating on the tops of the trees rather than over the trackside pools and ditches though :-\ . We got all the way up to the pool having drawn a blank, so we saw no point in going any further and stopped. Something moved in the water so I looked down and couldn't believe what I was seeing. It wasn't what we'd gone there for, so we'd still failed to see Northern Emerald but it was a Newt! We always complain that when we see Newts they're either dead or in trouble so this was a welcome sight. There was a perfectly healthy **Palmate Newt** going about its business under the water, just like how we'd always hoped to see one :). We watched it for ages swimming around and catching flies from the surface, so I went in to try for a shot.



Palmate Newt

It's a good job it'd moved when I was looking at the pool otherwise we'd never have spotted it. After that we headed back quite pleased at finally having just seen something of interest. On the way back there wasn't nearly as many insects on the wing so unfortunately we'd dipped on Northern Emerald again :(We spotted a Footman (type) Moth on the way down the hill and were back at the car by 4.03pm.

With the weather having improved it seemed a shame to call it a day just yet, even though we were feeling pretty tired by then. We had loads to do before leaving in the morning too but I was so gutted about our lack of Butterflies I really wanted to go back to Ariundle Oakwood to test out the 3rd time lucky theory. This was the 1st place I'd visited on our arrival in Strontian and was also going to be the last. The place had such great potential if the weather was good and apart from when I went there on my own on the 1st evening the conditions had been far from ideal.

It was 4.29pm when I parked up in the car park at Ariundle and the sun was still shining. This time I decided we'd do the loop path backwards so through the Ancient Oakwood 1st then out onto the bog last. We headed down the now familiar path through the woods and then it started to rain.....Nooooooooo!



Oakwood

If it didn't stop then we really would be wasting our time and knowing how much she had to do back at HQ Wendy was starting to lose her patience and will. I was contemplating doing a new track which took you into the woods up on the hill to see if we could find our Butterflies in there but Wendy wasn't so keen. She reckoned she was too tired to climb another hill and that there'd be midgies and ticks in there too and didn't fancy it much. It wasn't an easy call, as this was our last chance of finding a Chequered Skipper before we left. What didn't help was that we knew we were there right at the end of their flight period, so there wouldn't be many left on the wing at this late stage if any at all. Originally I'd wanted to come to Ardnamurchan for the 1st week and Speyside 2nd for the specific reason of catching Chequered Skipper before it was too late. The odds were totally stacked against us and we doubted very much that we'd ever be returning there, so we were going to have to give it one last shot.

In the end I decided to stick to the normal loop track and Wendy found some more Tadpoles in the shallow puddles at the side of the track, which you just wouldn't see at home. We thought the Isle of Man got a lot of rain but for Tadpoles to survive in tiny puddles strongly suggested that Strontian wins hands down! Carrying on through the woods we came across a Tree Pipit with young. We still found it odd that we hadn't seen any of the Oak Woodland birds we'd expected to like Wood Warbler, Pied fly and Redstart. Very strange. The rain seemed to have stopped again and rays of sun were shining down through the trees onto the flowers on the ground but there were no Butterflies on the wing at all... :(. Wendy was getting impatient and wanted to go back to HQ but I wasn't giving up until I'd given it my best shot. We eventually turned right and went over the bridge to head back via the riverside path and took in the scenery for the last time.



Making the most of it

We couldn't help but feel sad that the weather had taken the shine off such a beautiful part of the world and wondered what it could've been like if the sun had shone for the week. We had a last minute look for Dipper but again there was no sign. Where were they all?

By then we were tired and fed up, so we trudged our way along the path through the boggy area feeling deflated that it was our last walk of the trip and we'd failed to see what we wanted yet again. We bumped into a guy who'd just spent 2 weeks on Orkney and was spending a week nearby. His 1st question to us was, "Have you seen any Dippers?" He too had failed to see one even after trying all his trusty sites just like us....Weird. After we'd chatted for a while we went our separate ways and the sky was looking threatening again, so we hurried along. We finally found a Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and then a Common Hawker whizzed past but we'd totally given up by then and just wanted to get home. Suddenly out the corner of my eye I saw a movement on the ground and looked down presuming it was some sort of moth. I literally couldn't believe what I was seeing and unable to spit the words out I made a panic noise and grabbed Wendy's arm, which made her nearly jump out of her skin! She looked too and couldn't believe it either and we both just stared at it in disbelief. I quite literally didn't believe it and thought I was doing a Northern Brown Argus again so got Wendy to check her Butterfly App on her phone, which she found very amusing. She waved the picture under my nose with a bemused look on her face as to why I needed confirmation. After seeing the picture I was happy to hand Lyca over to Wendy, so I could try and get a shot of our, albeit rather tatty, 1st ever **Chequered Skipper Butterfly** feeding on an orchid. Woo Hoo! There wasn't much that could dampen my spirits but the fact that there was grass in the way spoiling my shot came pretty close, so I put my finger next to it to see if it'd move into a better position. Imagine my surprise when it went better than that and actually landed on my finger! I held my hand up to show a shocked Wendy who grabbed a quick point and click shot just for posterity :).



OMG!

When I put it back down in the grass it wasn't in the best place at all and the long grass was causing me a few problems but eventually I ended up with this shot.



Chequered Skipper

Wendy wasn't happy to hang about for too long as Lyca was sitting in and snuffling around in the long grass, which looked perfect for ticks. She pulled her out and made her sit on the path but when she bent down to stroke her, as she was looking bored, she saw something on her snout. On closer inspection it was a tick and it was crawling up towards her head, so Wendy had no option but to grab the disgusting creature between her fingers.....Bleurrghhh! Knowing how indestructible ticks are, she knew she'd never be able to squash it, so she sent it on presumably its 1st ever flying lesson and flicked it as far away as possible.....Hahaha :). That was the last straw and she just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible and after her mud bath at Glenborrodale Lyca also needed a bath just to add to our 'to do' list. I tore myself away knowing that we'd probably never see another Chequered Skipper again but that we'd been incredibly lucky to have seen that one literally right at the last minute. The walk back was longer

than we remembered and the path seemed endless, so when it started to rain again we weren't amused. This made us think about how maybe if we'd done things differently we could well have been leaving empty handed again. It was lucky that we'd dodged the rain, had chosen to do the walk backwards, and had decided against trying a different walk through the woods instead because Wendy was sick of climbing hills. Who knows but we'd finally got what we had been wishing for the entire week and what a way to end our trip! This was the 1st and last place I'd visited since arriving in Strontian and it had finally come up trumps :).

Back at the car it was 6pm and 5 minutes later we were parking up outside HQ for the last time. Wendy went in 1st to get the bath ready and I carried Lyca in, so as not to make a mess of the house. After her thorough scrub and tick check I took her off for her blow dry while Wendy set about making tea. After we'd all eaten and had baths it was time to start packing up and cleaning. Wendy put the 1st load of washing on and I set out brushing and Hoovering the floors. It was later than usual when we finally sat down to chill out and when Wendy did she noticed Lyca gnawing at her side. When we had a look we weren't at all surprised to find yet another tick, which put her total at eight! This one was stubborn and just wouldn't let go but eventually we successfully removed it and wondered how many more we'd find.....Yuk! When the last of the washing had finished and the hallway resembled a laundry and the jam sarnie and camera had been put out we headed off to bed at 11.45pm.

Saturday 2nd July

Seeing as today was going to be longest of the trip I wasn't impressed at waking up at 5.10am! I had to stay awake until 2.15am the next morning and could really have done with more sleep than that but I managed to doze until Wendy surfaced at 7am. It was overcast and raining outside but excitingly the sarnie had gone, so I took Lyca out for a wee and brought the camera in. When I looked through the footage it'd totally failed to catch the culprit again, so we had no idea if we'd had the Pine Marten back or not.....Grrrrrrr! I can only assume it was so it was a bit disappointing thinking that we should've had more footage of a Pine Marten. After breakfast Wendy started making our sarnies for the day ahead and packing up or disposing of our remaining food. The dishwasher was put on for a quick cycle while she rushed around packing and cleaning around the things we were still using. While she was doing that I was trying to hatch a plan for the day ahead, so 1st I had a look at the weather forecast and my fears were confirmed. It was forecasting rain for the entire day all the way down the west coast from Harris and Lewis to South Wales including the Lake District :(Absolutely typical! It was like that band of rain was sitting there just to annoy us. This wasn't good news seeing as I had a few places in mind to visit in Cumbria as well as The Lake District and I wanted to finish off at Leighton Moss, as it'd been years since we'd been there because it's not particularly dog friendly. I reckoned that we should end up in the Silverdale Hotel seeing as it's under new management, dog friendly and apparently much better than when we'd paid it our 1 and only visit to date. To top it all off there were gales forecast for the Irish Sea, so it was looking as though our crossing was going to be rough too! What were we going to do until we ended up in the pub at around 10pm? Unbelievable! This wasn't a good start to the day and my mood was pretty bad, so when I asked Wendy if I could start taking our cases out to load up the car and she told me she hadn't finished packing yet I was pretty annoyed. We had to be out by 10am and I just wasn't in the mood for her hippy attitude of, "It'll be fine" and, "Nobody's going to come round and shoot us if we're a few minutes late!" Why she hadn't sorted the majority of it out last night was anyone's guess and I'd even warned her that this was going to happen....Urrghhhhh!

It was 10.05am when we were finally ready to go and we waved, "Goodbye" to Bramble Cottage with mixed emotions. It had been a fabulous place to stay but the weather had really taken the shine off the Ardnamurcan area and we just hadn't been able to see it at

its best to do it justice. This was a real shame, as we can only imagine how much more we would have seen if it had been sunny for the week :(My 1st plan of action was to fill the car up with petrol at the garage down the road, so we headed straight there. I started to fill the tank only for it to stop at £9 because the garage had run out of fuel.....Aarrghhhh! Now what? I just had to hope that we'd find another garage somewhere nearby otherwise we weren't going anywhere and would be stuck in Strontian.....Errkk! I went in to pay and warn the old guy behind the counter, who must've been the owner. I couldn't believe that he still used a calculator and didn't have a till to do the work for him. Then again he probably didn't see that many people coming through his doors being in such an isolated community. When I told Wendy she laughed and said that she'd noticed that too when she'd been in and bought the tick removers.....Hahaha! The last time either of us had seen that was in that horrible Pine Marten Bar in Glenmore but there's no excuse for them, as they must do a roaring trade! It was so grey and wet that it felt like winter as we drove away but we were both just relieved to finally be off the single track, winding and claustrophobic roads with their crazy drivers by then. It may have felt more worthwhile if the sun had been shining and we'd been driving alongside the Lochs, like we'd imagined. We'd expected it to be more like the Hebs but in reality it was so hilly that we were usually driving well above the Lochs and trees usually blocked the scenery, so you couldn't see it. Not only that but the pea soup that had frequently descended hadn't helped matters either!

My plan was to get the Corran Ferry near Fort William to shorten the journey and save myself from having to drive all the way round Lochs Linnhe and Eil, which was handy seeing as I didn't have much petrol. When we got there the 10.30am Ferry was already full, so we went on a petrol station hunt after seeing a sign for one approaching the terminal. Needless to say there was absolutely no sign of any petrol station in the area and not wanting to miss the next ferry I went back and joined the queue. This was an even shorter crossing than the one to Mull and it only cost £8.20 for cars and bikes and pedestrians were free.



Loch Linnhe

Wendy was by then bursting for a wee and the only place she could see that would have a toilet was the pub over the road. She got out and wandered over, disappearing inside while I watched the ferry on its return with my fingers crossed that she wouldn't be too long and cause us to miss it. When she came back she looked puzzled and said that she'd gone in and followed the signs through various different rooms and corridors all the way out to the back of the building and still hadn't found the toilets! Uh oh! I was just surprised that she'd found her way back out again.....Hahaha. She reckoned that the

Hotel must get sick of ferry passengers going in to use their loos, so they've set up a wild goose chase just to scupper them :P.

We boarded the ferry at 10.53am and were leaving at 11am for our 3 minute crossing. Why they don't just build a bridge is beyond me! It was another sea Loch, which just didn't seem right as we were well inland and made me wonder where on earth the sea came in from? Again the crossing was so calm you wouldn't have known you were on a boat but by the time we'd driven off I hadn't saved any time at all, just petrol and faff on the single track roads. This was better than nothing though but I still needed to find a petrol station and quickly! Fortunately as we drove away we spotted Onich Service Station, so I pulled in to refuel....Phew! Wendy saw a sign for WC's, so her panic was over and she went straight into the shop to pay them a quick and much needed visit. It already felt like we'd been on the move for ages even though we hadn't even started yet but I had no choice but to just knuckle down and drive :{.

We were leaving Scotland via a new route this time and having thought it would be interesting to see some new scenery the weather had other ideas. Glencoe, although probably a wonderful sight on a nice day, looked dreary through the thick cloud and torrential rain.



Glencoe

The road through the valley was slow going and we were getting nowhere fast, so our hearts sank when we saw a 'Police Accident' sign in the road up ahead.....Urrghhhhh! We stopped at the back of the queue and looked around for any signs of an accident but instead we discovered that it was some mad rambling hikers on some kind of race or something. Nutters! They were all clad in florescent orange waterproofs and if their boots weren't soggy enough Wendy watched in horror as some of them splashed their way straight through the middle of a mountain stream. Brrrrrr.....it must've been freezing! It didn't look like much fun in the awful weather and it was only 10c but then it takes all sorts! We were finally on the move again and further up the road there was a checkpoint for the hikers with a sign saying "21 miles to go." No thanks! Wendy laughed out loud when she saw another one further on that along with the bottles of water they were providing was also a bottle of Whiskey. Only in Scotland! She said that even though she can't stand the stuff even she'd have been very tempted just to take the edge off the next 21 miles in the torrential rain :P. There were walkers everywhere, so the turn out was unbelievably good considering it was such a horrendous day.

Further along we passed Glencoe Ski Resort and then a flat area of several Lochs, which had it been anywhere else we would've thought was a flood plain. Wendy tried to get some drive by shots of it but they didn't come out very well.



Lochs

By 11.47am we'd reached Argyll and Bute and we were severely bored already. I'd earmarked Bridge of Orchy as a stop off to stretch our legs and give Lyca a bit of a walk but when we got there it was really busy and throwing it down, so we decided to just carry on in the hope of finding some better weather. Wendy was getting worried that Lyca might want a wee by then, so when we saw the huge sign for "Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park" I pulled into the layby area. I could see a gate where I reckoned I could get through to let Lyca out and stretch my legs. I walked the 5 yards to the gate and found that it was locked and there was no other way through, so after Lyca had sniffed around but hadn't performed I gave up and went back to the car. Next we started to see some signs we really didn't need warning us of increased traffic due to the Highland Games.....Noooooooooooo! There'd definitely been more traffic than we'd expected, so this just explained everything.

As we drove on we went through Crianlarich so I thought there might be somewhere to stop for lunch and hopefully have a walk. Driving around I found a Forestry Commission car park so we stopped at 12.15pm. Unfortunately it seemed quite popular and there were people with dogs off their leads hanging around. We took the opportunity to have our lunch in the car to see if they would leave but they didn't and it also started to chuck it down again.....Grrrrrr! I took Lyca out to see if she needed a wee yet but she just had a sniff around and ran back to the car wagging her tail and looking at Wendy. By then we both could've done with one ourselves and had no idea where the nearest toilets were, so we headed into the town. I'd stayed there in past and even recognized the lodge I'd stayed in but we finally found some public toilets opposite a pub....Phew! We didn't know when we'd be stopping again, so this was very handy and we were back on the road again at 12.39pm.

Without even realizing we found ourselves driving alongside Loch Lomond and call me a cynic but I couldn't really see what all the fuss was about. It was huge but there are far nicer Lochs in Scotland but that's just my opinion :). The traffic was horrendous and we were crawling along as though there was a Tortoise drawn cart at the front and making very little progress :(It seemed that the Highland Games were in Luss between where we were and Glasgow, so we wondered if that was why it was so busy. When we got to the junction for Luss not one car turned off and they all carried on.....Grrrrrrrr! It was

frustrating to say the least but eventually we realized the source of the crawling traffic was an ancient old Model T Ford or something as it'd pulled into a layby to let the tailback of a few miles finally get past!! There was only 6 cars in front of us but now we were being held up by the caravan at the front.....Grrrrrrrr! We finally managed to overtake the caravan on the approach to Glasgow, so I could put my foot down and try to make up for lost time.

This was all well and good until we went through Dumbarton and found ourselves in a big hold up due to road works at Erskine Bridge. We waited ages to get through the lights and again the traffic was at a crawl, so the boredom was getting to us big time. Skirting round Glasgow was a lot less busy than I'd expected so we very quickly got past that and started heading down south proper.

We let out a cheer when we reached Dumfries and Galloway at 3.05pm and knowing that it was only 2 hours away from Heysham it felt like we'd broken the back of the journey. We weren't going straight to Heysham though so it was a false reading if you like and when Wendy saw the sign for Annandale Services she was more than ready to make a detour for a snack and a coffee. I wasn't so keen and wanted to keep going but she was adamant and I had no choice. It was 3.20pm when we got there and Wendy bailed out to use the WC's after all the water she'd guzzled on the way. When she came back she was clutching a bag and she'd even honored my hints and had got me a McFlurry.....Om nom nom :). She also had some fries to share and a Cappuccino for herself, so we were both happy. After that the sun came out, so I let Lyca out again and she still didn't perform! We left at 3.47pm and had hit Cumbria by 4.09pm where the rain was torrential and visibility was dire.....Urrrghhhhh! We could see that it stretched all the way down to the Lake District, where we were heading, so our plans looked set to be scuppered. Wendy noticed that there were blue skies in the direction of Kirby Lonsdale and Skipton, so suggested we headed there instead but I wanted to stick to my original plan and carried on into more rain much to her disgust. If the rain stopped, even for a bit, my plan would be worth sticking to. Somewhere along this section Wendy had another pop at the phallic shaped plantation, this time she did a better job of capturing it!



Just about!

At 5.22pm I parked up at Barkbooth Lot in The Lake District and unfortunately it was still raining relentlessly. I'd pinpointed this Cumbria Wildlife Trust Reserve in the last few days of researching somewhere to visit. I'd found it had High Brown Fritillary's which would be a lifer for us so that was enough of an incentive to give it a go especially

as it wasn't that far off our route down. Wendy reminded me that we could've turned left and escaped the rain but I'd chosen to ignore her. We got out of the car for a wander over into the woods. First we turned right where we came to a gate, where there was a footpath down a hill which I was guessing was the area the High Brown Frits favoured.



Looks good

On closer inspection it was so overgrown that there was no way we were getting through it without a machete, so we turned back to check out the left hand path instead.



Woods

We didn't have much joy there either and the path was pretty overgrown and dripping with rain, so we decided against going any further. There were more birds singing in there than we'd heard all week on the West Coast of Scotland though, which was more like it! I found a wooded box with info leaflets and a report book in it, so I grabbed a leaflet and had a look to see what'd been reported and was pleasantly surprised. If the weather had been favourable I'd definitely found a place worth a visit and one bloke had seen Golden-ringed Dragonfly, Downy Emerald, Grass Snake and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary to name but a few! His list was vast and even included the Latin names, so he obviously knew his stuff! It was just a shame there was no point us being there, as

there'd be nothing about in the awful conditions! It started to get even darker, so we rushed back to the car just in time for the heavens to open. We'd managed to dodge another thorough soaking and when I read the leaflet and learned that ticks were abundant we'd also dodged that particular pleasure too! We'd seen enough ticks to last us a while after the past week I think. Going to Barkbooth Lot had turned out to be a complete waste of time but not to be deterred I started the car up to head to my next (hastily planned) stop.

Wendy all of a sudden realized that it was way past Lyca's dinner time, so I promptly turned the engine off again and got out to get her dinner from the boot. Initially she wasn't interested even though Wendy had added some broccoli to it. Wendy got her taste buds going by hand feeding her some broccoli and the rest was gobbled up in no time. After she'd had her Dentastick we left and it was already 5.48pm, so we were glad we had stopped at Annandale Services and had eaten something to keep us going for a bit longer.

Not long after we had left it started to brighten up, so we had a new lease of hope for our next plan. We passed a dead Badger at the side of the road and then the real black clouds came back over and it started to rain again.....Flipping heck! We ended up driving through Milnthorpe, which was much nicer than we'd expected. We'd been through it before in the dark one night when we needed petrol quickly after we'd been to The Albion. We let out a chuckle when we saw a sign for 'Fell End Campsite' and wondered how it'd survived being defaced all this time without someone noticing its obvious potential for comedy value :P. Next we drove through Silverdale, past Leighton Moss and my sat nav stopped working. I pulled over to sort it out before carrying on and finding our next stop.

It was 6.23pm when I parked up at Warton Crag Nature Reserve and the 1st thing we noticed was 2 lads in the car park belting a football about. Did I really want to leave the car unattended with them there? My car has taken enough of a battering of late for me to risk getting any more damage, so I was instantly put off getting out for walk even though it was sunny for the 1st time all day. Looking at the sheer rock face in front of us we both instantly commented that it looked perfect for Peregrines just before a Pigeon flew over.



Warton Crag

I said, "Pigeon with a death wish!" and 30 seconds later a Peregrine appeared. It landed up on the rocks and was shortly followed by another. In the end we had 4, 2x adults

with 2x young ones and they put on a great display with the adults seemingly showing the young how it's done. There were also 2 dogs off their leads, so we decided to have our tea and wait to see if any of them would clear off so we could go for a walk. We ate our 2nd sarnie of the day and crossed our fingers but the lads didn't look like they were going anywhere in a hurry and even more people turned up, so we ditched it off. It was a shame, as the weather was the best we'd seen it all day and we really could've done with letting Lyca out for a bit. All was not lost though and we headed off to Leighton Moss at 6.49pm.

When we arrived I was unnerved by a white hire van parked up in the car park. The notice warning vehicle drivers that thieves operate in the area didn't help matters, so I took a wander over to see if there was anyone in it. I reckoned it was OK and we set off at 7.03pm down the busy road to get onto the public footpath. Unfortunately dogs aren't allowed on most of the reserve, so we were limited to where we could go but I was hopeful that we'd be able to go down the causeway and through the gate at the bottom of the path to the lower hide. We saw a Jay as we walked down the road and heard a Great-spotted Woodpecker but the road was really busy and anything but pleasant to be on with a dog. When we got onto the footpath we both thought we could hear a distant Tawny Owl calling but it was so faint we couldn't decide if it was just wishful thinking, which was a shame as unbelievably it would've been the 1st of the 2 week trip! There were midgies everywhere and Wendy reminded me of a trip years ago when we'd survived an entire week in Norfolk without any bites but had been eaten alive on our last evening spent at Leighton Moss.....Uh oh! Wendy who'd given up counting after 48 bites wasn't happy as we ploughed our way through swarm after swarm of midgies but eventually a small brown bird flying across the path distracted us. This was our last chance to add some new birds to our trip list so we stopped to see if it was what we hoped it to be. Sure enough it blasted out a song briefly and we added **Reed Warbler** to our list. When we got to the Causeway Hide we obviously couldn't go inside because of Lyca, so we peered through the screen at the pool.



1st Pool

Firstly we heard the squealing of a **Water Rail** and then we added **Great-crested Grebe, Gadwall, Tufted Duck** and **Pintail** out on the water.

We carried on but the midgie situation was how we'd imagined it to be in Scotland but it just hadn't happened fortunately. We needn't have gone further than Cumbria - if only we'd known....Doh :P. Wendy spotted a **Vole** scurrying across the path ahead but fortunately Lyca hadn't. We then heard the call that had been bugging us all the way

down and we finally confirmed **Tawny Owl**. There were loads of Swifts zooming over our heads, so I decided to stop and try to get a shot of one and luckily got one I was pretty pleased with.



Swift

Wendy quickly got bored and started talking about how she remembered finding a Hobby sitting in tree miles away right at the back of the Reserve on a previous trip. I couldn't remember it at all but she had, as it's in the article, so I dismissed it and carried on trying to photograph the Swifts. Funnily enough they'd all decided to clear off and were nowhere near us so I had to give up. All of a sudden a small raptor flew in over the pool, so we raised our bins only to see a **Hobby** zooming through :O! Wow!



Hobby

Who'd have thought we'd have seen a Hobby there before a Marsh Harrier? We heard a **Coot** but down at the bottom of the path at the gate to the Lower Hide was a sign saying, "NO DOGS!" Grrrrrr! That was the end of the line for us but we wandered over to the field where there were plenty of Swallows feeding over the long grass. For some reason I thought I was super pro photographer and decided to try for a Swallow flight shot in the dreary evening light. That obviously was a total waste of time so I quickly gave up.

By then we'd given up on seeing anything else even though we'd hoped to hear a Gropper or Beardie and even see a common as muck Marsh Harrier but they just didn't seem to be about. We turned round and started to head back wondering what on earth we were going to do next, as our visit to Leighton Moss hadn't killed as much time as we had hoped. The rain clouds were starting to encroach as well so we didn't want to hang around!



Incoming rain

The reeds were too high to see over so we were relying on our ears more than anything on the way back but all of a sudden we spotted a big bird landing out of view over the causeway pool. We rushed back up to the screen to get a view and finally we had had our **Marsh Harrier**, in fact there were 2 of them. The Hobby was still sitting in the tree it had landed in.

When we got back to the entrance Wendy said she needed a wee, so we went across the road to the Visitor Centre. She spotted a dog bowl in the garden, so presumed that dogs were welcome in there and told me to follow her. I was reluctant and didn't trust her but sure enough the bowl was there with a sign saying "Help yourself" or words to that effect next to it. I was still feeling uneasy about bringing Lyca in but there was nobody else about, so I kept my fingers crossed that it'd stay that way. After we'd both made use of the WC's Wendy wanted to go for a look around and was very impressed. When they had initially done away with the car park, which we used to always park in for tea on our way to Heysham we didn't like what we saw. Now it was established, having not seen it for years it looked really good and would even attract Wildlife to it, which was much better :).



Visitor Centre garden

I went over to look at the Moth Trap and noticed that they'd had to put wire mesh around it, presumably to stop birds from eating all the Moths. It wasn't switched on, so instead we went over to the feeders to see if we could find ourselves a last minute Marsh Tit. It was already pretty dark in amongst the trees, so there were no birds anywhere and if that wasn't annoying enough the next thing I spotted certainly was. There was a sign on a gate saying that you could take dogs down to the causeway from the garden, so we'd walked down the busy road for nothing! If we'd known that 1st we could've saved ourselves the stress and probably stood more chance of finding Marsh Tit :(We'll know for next time though and with that revelation we headed back to the car.

It was still only 8.13pm, so seeing as it was such a nice evening Wendy suggested going to Silverdale for a look, as it was still too early to go to the pub. We were pretty sure that you could take dogs down the footpath, so it seemed like a good plan. When we got there I went to park up but Wendy shrieked, "NO DOGS?" I stopped the car and looked at the gate only to see a big sign with a "No Dogs" written on it.....Grrrrrrrr! We were looking forward to visiting the Morecombe Bay Reserve again too as we hadn't been in a very long time :(Poor Lyca must've been getting very bored by then and we needed to find somewhere else to take her for at least a leg stretch. Wendy had by then discovered that she'd been bitten on her bum by a midgie and was wriggling around in the seat looking decidedly itchy....Hahahah! I couldn't believe how lightly I'd come away from the trip seeing as it's usually me that they target...Phew! That was all my locations exhausted apart from 1 more, which I headed off to before it was too late. Driving through the narrow roads on the way to Arnside we couldn't believe how many public footpaths there were and you would need a weeks holiday to explore them all! There was a place called Eaves Wood, which was National Trust owned and looked interesting and might be worth a visit in future. Also what struck us was how big the houses were and having only really driven through the area in the dark on the way to the pub we were quite surprised as to how nice it was.

We found ourselves driving up a very steep and narrow road behind the houses and we finally came out at the top into the car park at Arnside Knott. The sun was still out when we got out of the car at 8.40pm, so the view from up there was spectacular. We were looking down over the entire estuary and viaduct, which made us realize how much we had missed our visits to Arnside with The Albion not being dog friendly.



Arnside

There were some info boards, so we went over to have a look but the 1st one wasn't really very inviting!



Ewwwww

That kind of put us off going much further, as the tick removers were packed away in the boot of car and would take some searching for if we needed them. The other board was a map of the reserve but I couldn't quite work out where we'd need to go to try and find the speciality there, which was also the High Brown Fritillary Butterfly.



Info

We took Lyca up a steep path, which was loose gravel and tricky underfoot but the view from the top was even more impressive than from the car park. The sun was beginning to set and it looked amazing, so I suggested since we were at Arnside maybe we should try going to The Albion 1st to see if it'd changed its policy on dogs. Wendy laughed at me for even thinking that they would've and said we'd be sitting outside but I reckoned it was worth a go. We went back to the car and down onto the prom and I parked up over the road. When we got to the outside seating area there were dog bowls, which was a huge hint that dogs weren't allowed inside. We spotted that there were heaters above the tables though and they now had a glass screen as a shelter from the wind.....very clever. I reckoned this would do us nicely so I sat down with Lyca while Wendy went inside to get us a drink.



Pub dog

By then it was 9.05pm and there were still a good few people milling around on the prom. The tide was right out and the sun setting over the hills made for a pleasant view, so it was nice to finally relax for a bit after our long day. Surprisingly we were even comfortably warm sitting under the heater even though it was quite windy. Wendy gave her Mum a quick ring using Whatsapp to let her know we'd arrived but the reception

was dreadful. While they chatted our ears pricked up when we heard a loud almost rumbling sound. We looked around and noticed a wave stretching across the entire estuary coming in really quickly, flooding the mudflats as it went.



Arnside Bore

It all happened so quickly and it was completely full of water within about a minute! Wendy, having never seen anything like it before, was giving her Mum a running commentary and her Mum asked, "Is it like The Severn Bore?" I said, "Yeah that's exactly what it is, although not as big." There was a bloke standing by the entrance with missing teeth and a fag in his hand who'd obviously overheard her conversation. He chirped up and said that it was called The Arnside Bore and happens twice a day but obviously in reverse when the tide goes out. It was so noisy and he told us to wait until it crashed against the viaduct because that was really loud, which we did but it was a bit of an anticlimax! I took some video with my phone, which of course didn't do it justice but it'd been pretty cool to see and we'd made a good decision to go there. After that it started to get a bit chilly even with the heater on and I fancied sitting down inside to warm up and chill out before driving to Heysham. Wendy was happy to stay to admire the view and eek out as much of the summer evening as she could, but I was starting to shiver and could feel my back twinging a bit. She finally agreed that we should go and give The Silverdale Hotel a go, so we headed straight there.

It was 10.15pm when we arrived and Wendy took her coat off to hide my camera with, as it was still in the foot well in the back and I didn't want it on full display. She went in 1st to double check that Lyca was allowed inside and the Landlord was very friendly (unlike the last one!) and said, "Yes, we're very dog friendly and you can sit anywhere apart from the conservatory." She gestured to me that it was OK, so I found us a table round the corner from the bar in a small side room, which we had to ourselves and was nice and warm.....Phew! Wendy went up to the bar and although it was surrounded by barflies they were very polite and moved out of the way to let her in, which is quite rare. They were all very loud Lancastrian blokes whose voices were hard to ignore but at least they broke the silence, as the pub was far from busy. Lyca curled up under the bench we were sitting on and went to sleep even though she'd not had much exercise all day or come to think of it all week. She was probably suffering from depression after the come down from all the fun she had during the 1st week of our trip in Feshiebridge! Poor dog! I was adamant that 11.30pm was our deadline and I didn't want to be leaving any later than that. I was tired and just wanted to get to Heysham without falling asleep at the wheel, so ignoring Wendy's protests that it was too early she brought our empties up to the bar and we left.

Back at the car it was 11.33pm and Wendy was freezing by then having had no coat on since arriving. Obviously she put it straight on and we set off on the last leg of the journey. We kept our eyes peeled for anything that moved and saw a massive Red Deer at the side of the road. They look much bigger when you see them out of the mountains of The Highlands. We caught a few **Bats** in the car headlights as well as Moths flying around everywhere. Yet again we failed to see any Owls and apart from the Tawny Owl we heard at Leighton Moss we hadn't seen any over the past 2 weeks. Worrying :(

Sunday 3rd July

We arrived at Asda at 12.04am and I filled the car without any random strangers asking me for favours. The store was closed, so I drove straight to the Ferry Terminal and joined the back of the small queue at 12.22pm. Fortunately the wind had dropped, so we breathed a sigh of relief that the crossing wasn't going to be as bad as we'd thought. After a long and boring wait we eventually boarded at 1.32am and dragged ourselves up the stairs to the desk to collect our cabin key. Lyca got lots of attention, as usual and seemed to be enjoying all the fuss. By the time we got to the cabin it was 1.43am and after Wendy had put the biscuits in her bag and we had cracked open the blankets we made ourselves comfortable and were asleep in no time.....Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. The next thing we knew was the announcement for vehicle drivers and their passengers to go to the vehicle decks.



Home

We were still ½ asleep but very glad to be driving off at 5.40am.

Back at home it was 5.45am and even though Wendy was really tired she couldn't afford to go back to bed, as she needed to sleep later so she could get up for work the next day. We put the heating on because it was freezing and had everything unpacked and put away by 8am, so we had breakfast and wandered around in a daze. Lyca was on Wendy's bed sleeping, so Wendy had a lie down next to her. While she was stroking her she found another dead tick, this time on her paw, which put her overall total at 9 :O! We weren't sorry to see the back of ticks and midgies I can tell you!

All in all we'd had another great trip, although the 2nd week had been disappointing to put it mildly. We'd been so excited about visiting the West Coast and somewhere new so had high expectations, which it unfortunately didn't live up to. There's no doubt that if

the weather had been good it would've been a lot better (even taking into account the horrific roads) and we would have seen loads of new things but that was a risk we'd chosen to take. Our 1st week had been much better and I was so pleased that we'd finally made the effort and walked up Ben Macdui :). I wouldn't advise doing it with just a small bottle of water and a biscuit each though and would definitely go better prepared, food wise, if we ever did again. In total I'd driven 1678 miles and all I could think was, "My poor old car!"

Wildlife sighting of the trip for me was tricky to choose between as we'd had some great encounters but seeing our first Golden-ringed Dragonfly was the one that stuck out. Especially as we've dipped on trying to see one before on so many occasions. Wendy's favourite was as always too difficult a decision to make, so it was a draw between 2 completely different species, Golden-ringed Dragonfly and the Otter rolling around on the rocks. We'd ended the 2 weeks having seen a total of 122 birds (much higher than our previous Scottish best of 106) and had seen enough lifer insects to keep us happy.....for a while anyway.

Birds

Mute Swan	Sparrowhawk	Swift	Spot Flycatcher
Greylag Goose	Buzzard	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Pied Flycatcher
Canada Goose	Golden Eagle	Skylark	Long-tailed Tit
Shelduck	Osprey	Sand Martin	Blue Tit
Gadwall	Kestrel	Swallow	Great Tit
Teal	Hobby	House Martin	Crested Tit
Mallard	Peregrine	Tree Pipit	Coal Tit
Black Duck	Water Rail	Meadow Pipit	Willow Tit
Pintail	Moorhen	Rock Pipit	Nuthatch
Tufted Duck	Coot	Grey Wagtail	Treecreeper
Eider	Oystercatcher	Pied Wagtail	Jay
Goldeneye	Dotterel	Wren	Maggie
Red-breasted Merganser	Lapwing	Dunnock	Jackdaw
Goosander	Snipe	Robin	Rook
Red Grouse	Curlew	Redstart	Carion Crow
Ptarmigan	Common Sandpiper	Whinchat	Hooded Crow
Red-legged Partridge	Redshank	Stonechat	Raven
Pheasant	Kittiwake	Wheatear	Starling
Black-throated Diver	Black-headed Gull	Ring Ouzel	House Sparrow
Little Grebe	Common Gull	Blackbird	Chaffinch
Great Crested Grebe	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Song Thrush	Greenfinch
Slavonian Grebe	Herring Gull	Mistle Thrush	Goldfinch
Fulmar	Great Black-backed Gull	Sedge Warbler	Siskin
Manx Shearwater	Sandwich Tern	Reed Warbler	Linnet
Gannet	Common Tern	Blackcap	Lesser Redpoll
Cormorant	Guillemot	Whitethroat	Crossbill
Shag	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Wood Warbler	Bullfinch
Grey Heron	Woodpigeon	Chiffchaff	Snow Bunting
Red Kite	Collared Dove	Willow Warbler	Yellowhammer
White-tailed Eagle	Cuckoo	Goldcrest	Reed Bunting
Hen Harrier	Tawny Owl		

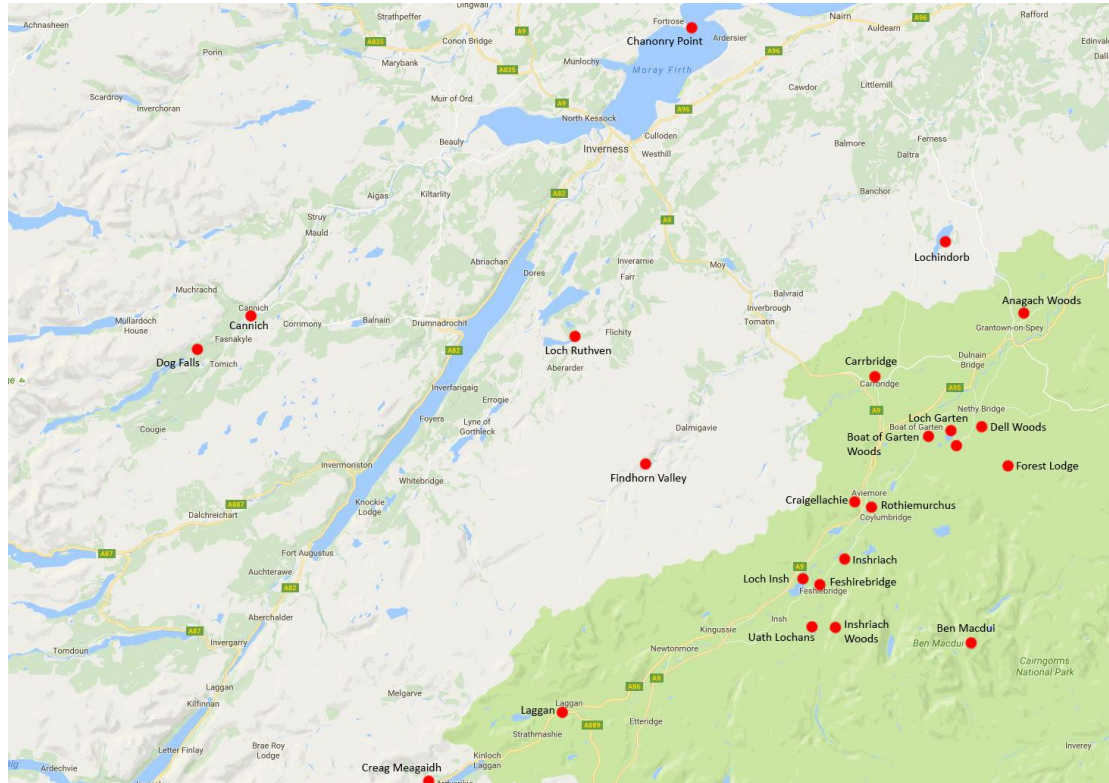
Dragonflies

Butterflies

Golden-Ringed Dragonfly	Large Heath
Downy Emerald	Dark Green Fritillary
Common Hawker	Small Pearl bordered Fritillary
4 Spotted Chaser	Common Blue

White-faced Darter	Chequered Skipper
Common Darter	Large White
Northern Damselfly	Meadow Brown
Common Blue Damselfly	Small Heath
Large Red Damselfly	Red Admiral
Blue tailed Damselfly	

1st Week locations



2nd week locations

