

Scotland Trip (Highlands & West Coast) – June 2016

When we'd reluctantly left the Highlands in March it seemed as though our June trip would never come round but before we knew it we only had a week to go :O! I had my 40th Birthday looming, so decided that like Wendy did for hers I wanted to go away. Apart from a book about midgies, which my Mum and Dad had given me, I was so badly prepared for this one it was untrue. I'd dropped my phone and instead of letting it fall onto the soft carpet I tried to save it, causing it to fall screen down onto the metal leg of the computer chair....NOOOOOOOOOO! It was totally dead and had to be sent away to be repaired, which unfortunately meant it had to be completely wiped, so I lost all my info including years worth of valuable holiday stuff :(There'd been a heatwave during the TT fortnight, which was affecting Scotland too and Lyca was looking far too hot for our liking. She was way too woolly to be out walking all day in temperatures like that, so Wendy had to message her groomer to see if we could get her in before we went away. It was looking doubtful, as the groomer is so popular but just in the nick of time she had a cancellation 2 days before we left....Phew! Lyca went off and came back looking like a different dog having had her shortest haircut ever!

As I'd finally got my holidays back up to 5 weeks a year I suggested doing a 2 weeker in the summer. Wendy liked the idea but 2 weeks doing the same walks in the Cairngorms might be pushing it so I looked for other ideas. Eventually I decided to try the west coast for the first time ever and pinpointed the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. It seemed to be really good for the rare and scare Butterflies, Dragonflies, supposedly had the highest concentration of Otters in Britain and best of all Pine Martens everywhere! That would do nicely. Ideally I'd hoped to go to the west coast for the 1st week and Cairngorms 2nd, as this would give us an excellent chance to see the rare Chequered Skipper Butterfly that's only found in a small radius around Fort William. It also finishes its flight period at the end of June, so the earlier we could be there the better, as our holiday would be during the last week of June and 1st week of July. Try as I might I couldn't find any cottages to fit in around our preferred way so had to settle for Cairngorms 1st week and West coast 2nd :(Ah well never mind. I tried to find somewhere new in the Cairngorms but the prices in summer were crazy so eventually decided to pay Ord Cottage at Feshiebridge another visit, seeing as it'd been so good last time and was relatively cheap. It was in an ideal location for everywhere we wanted to go for Dragonflies and Butterflies and had a brilliant walk along the River Feshie right on the doorstep. We'd failed to see any last time, as it was too early but we'd pinned down the location on the nearby footpath for Small Blue and Dingy Skipper Butterflies. This time around we planned to put some effort into seeing them.....weather and midgies permitting of course! We'd had some pretty good nights of moth trapping too with the woods being behind the house and had even had a resident Wood Warbler just across the river.....Sorted! For the west coast I was really hoping to find a cottage that had a Pine Marten visiting the garden. There were several but they were even more expensive than the Cairngorms cottages so I eventually picked out a small cottage in Strontian, which was a bit further out from the peninsula than I'd have liked but still within the range of where we wanted to be. We'd only ever been to the West Coast once on a day trip and that was only to look for Sea Eagles over on Gruinard Island, so it was all going to be new to us. If the weather was kind to us I had the idea of maybe doing a day trip to Mull as my Dad had said the ferry over was a little thing you just drive on and off and really easy.

When I started trying to book the ferry I hit a massive snag. Again I had the issue of no dog cabins being available on the Saturday 2.15am sailing, so we'd have to come home on the Sunday instead. This didn't give us any recovery time before going back to work. Luckily enough I was able to book the Monday off and the next day was the Tynwald Day bank holiday too so I was laughing :). Unfortunately Wendy couldn't do the same and would have to go straight back to work on the Monday.....if she could actually get out of bed!

Typically the weather cracked up just before we were due to go and the temperatures in Scotland plummeted, so this was going to make packing light a bit tricky. Maybe it'd keep the midgies at bay though? Just when I didn't need it to, my dodgy black toe tail (from being hammered playing badminton) dropped off meaning that I now had a very vulnerable toe! I'd have to be really careful not to bash it or worse still get an infection but luckily Wendy had a course of antibiotics to take away with us just in case of an emergency. There's always something! On a happier note, although my wallet was £160 lighter, my phone came back just in time for me to set it all up again for the trip.....Phew!

Friday 18th June

Making use of my extra holidays this year I'd booked the day off work while Wendy had to go in.....Hahahahaha :P. This was a nice change for me and meant that I didn't have to work through my lunch or have such a rush on my hands. Saying that though, I'd been up since 6.30am too and had done loads of jobs round the house during the day, not the cleverest of ways to start a two week holiday. Wendy just crossed her fingers that she'd be finished in good time at the end of the day. Although there hadn't been a breath of wind for the entire week all of sudden it decided to pick up to be the strongest it'd been in about a month just in time for our journey!!!! It was meant to die down but seemed to be doing the complete opposite..... Grrrrrr! Wendy managed to finish at 5.15pm and after having her tea and a quick bath we packed up the last of the stuff and were ready to go.

Arriving at the Sea Terminal at 6.51pm we started our trip list with **Herring Gull** and **Feral Pigeon** before going through the check in hut. We were told that the dog lounge was full, which was a new one on us, so we were even more pleased that we had a cabin. A very angry looking woman in a Range Rover a couple of cars ahead of us all of a sudden did a sharp U-turn and screeched back out of the gates leaving us baffled as to what could possibly have just happened. As we drove in some **House Sparrows** flew in to feed on the ground outside the terminal building. Just when we thought we were going to join the queue we were ushered straight into the searching bayUrrrghhhhh! It used to happen to us every time we went away without fail but it'd been a while and was probably long overdue. All of a sudden I had a horrible flashback to the bird squeaker dry lubricant incident and instantly double-checked that it wasn't in the car. Fortunately there were no clear tubes of white powder to try and explain this time but we couldn't just go through without a hitch could we? One of blokes, who obviously was trying to lighten things up a bit, said to me, "I take it this tripod is for a camera not a sniper rifle?" I couldn't think of anything witty to reply with so just nervously laughed. After they were satisfied the 4 security staff made a huge fuss of Lyca. One of the girls had asked, "Is that a Cockerpoo I can hear?" so she'd even recognized the bark from the car! Lyca was more than

happy to accept all the attention and stood up on her back legs and started dancing :P.

We eventually joined the queue and had a quick scan of Douglas Head adding **House Martin** and **Pied Wagtail** to our list. We looked forward to being one of the 1st to board, as the searched queue usually goes on before everyone but we had no such luck this time. All the other cars went on and us dodgy looking types were left until last.....Grrrrr! Surprisingly though the cars were boarding before the foot-passengers for a change. I drove up the ramp and waited for my instructions as to where to park but the bloke wasn't making any sense and best of all he was standing right in my blind spot so I couldn't even see his guidance! I struggled to understand where he was telling me to go so parked up where I thought he meant. Typically it was wrong and he came over in a nark and told me to move.

We breathed a sigh of relief to finally get to the cabin at 7.25pm and Lyca jumped straight onto the bed and curled up right on top of the blanket Wendy had just put out for herself.



Budge up!

We had quite a good view from the window so we had a quick scan out to sea with our bins and added **Great Black-backed Gull** and **Eider** to our still very small list. Next came the announcement about our departure with the addition of telling passengers that if the dog lounge was full (which we knew it was) dogs must be kept in vehicles and not brought into normal cabins or lounges. All of a sudden the penny dropped as to why that woman in the Range Rover had been so angry and had left. She obviously didn't want to leave her dog in the car on the vehicle decks and we can't really say we blame her, we'd do exactly the same. We set off early at 7.35pm and headed out into the nice calm sea, as the wind had died right down just in time.....Phew! When we were a bit further out and to fill in some time we had another scan and saw **Gannet**, **Manx Shearwater** and **Fulmar** but it was pretty dead and uninspiring out there. It'd become apparent that there was a screaming child next door and we really hoped that it would settle down. I was starving having had no tea yet and was more than ready for my chicken burger and chips, so Wendy pressed the button for room service.

Within 30 seconds there was a knock at the door and she gave the guy our order. Not long after he was back with our tray and handed it over to Wendy who put it down on the table and went back to pay. She handed him £20 but he said that he could only bring her wine after we'd left Manx waters and she was given the option of paying for everything then or putting in a new order later. She decided to trust him and paid for the lot hoping that he didn't forget the wine or the change and off he went. When she sat back down she instantly noticed that there was something missing from my plate.....chips! She wasn't happy, as she was planning on nicking some of them and got straight up and pressed the buzzer again. Within seconds a different bloke knocked on the door and after she told him he said that it wasn't a problem and he'd go and get some right away. True to his word he was back in record time with my chips, so we were both happy. Wendy's happiness didn't last long when she noticed that he hadn't given us any salt or pepper to go on them but there was no way she was pressing the buzzer again and had to make do. Shortly after I'd finished eating there was another knock at the door and it was the guy with Wendy's wine and change, so she could finally relax.

By 9.15pm we were already bored stupid, so decided to go up onto the decks for a bit of sea watching.



Brrrrrrrr

We'd hoped that Lyca would do a wee but she didn't and it was so cold out there that Wendy was shivering. All we managed to see was a **Lesser Black-backed Gull** and we gave it up as a bad job and went back to the confines of the cabin. It'd been a long and busy day, so I wasn't surprised to see that my Fitbit was telling me I'd done 24,000 steps. We both must've been tired, as shortly after turning the lights off we managed to get just over an hours sleep. When I woke up I took Lyca out again to try again for a wee before we started the drive up north. Yet again she didn't perform but we were already really close to Heysham by 10.45pm.....Yey :). I was amazed at the quality of low light shot my phone managed to take of the scene!



Heysham

I rushed back to the cabin and told Wendy to get her skates on as we were nearly there but she didn't believe me so I opened the curtain to show her. She was still $\frac{1}{2}$ asleep and in no hurry but the announcement for vehicle drivers to go their cars came at 11pm so she had to snap out of it pretty quickly.

Unbelievably we were driving off the boat at 11.12pm, which was really early and meant that we'd arrive at the Travelodge in good time to get a decent night sleep. We managed to get as far as the 1st car showroom in Heysham (i.e. not very far at all!) when all of sudden Lyca started yelping really loudly and wriggling frantically in the back seat as though she was in agony! What the....? I quickly pulled over in the widest part of the road and slammed on my brakes. I switched on the interior light behind me and with our hearts racing we both turned round to see what on earth was wrong with her. By then she was just standing there looking at us as if we'd lost the plot and we couldn't see any problem at all.....Urrghhhh! We still don't know what it was all about but my only logical explanation is that she'd got her leg caught in her new seatbelt. Since she'd learned how to disconnect herself from her old one I'd looked into alternatives, as the last thing I needed was her appearing in the front seat when I was on the motorway. The one I'd chosen gave her a bit more room to move and I thought she'd be more comfortable, so I hoped that this incident was a one off and not the start of more problems. Dogs! Just to add to the stress a Lorry bombed past us really close and the driver was honking his horn like mad. I looked at where I'd pulled in to see if there was a problem but I wasn't in the way at all, so I was a bit annoyed, especially as my indicator was flashing. Still a bit wound up I pulled away before any other driver could freak out for no reason....Grrrrrrr! I asked Wendy to turn the light off for me but she couldn't reach it because her arm wasn't long enough, so I ended up having to do it, which wasn't ideal whilst driving! :O. As if I wasn't annoyed enough I then missed the turn off to Scotland due to some stupid roadworks! The signs were so small that I didn't notice them, so we ended up heading towards Caton in Lancashire! Grrrrrrrrr! Not the stress free start I'd hoped for! After I'd shouted out a few expletives Wendy casually mentioned that I could just turn around and go back. Yes, thanks for that! Luckily I found somewhere and we got back on track having only lost 10 minutes.

Saturday 18th June

At 12.37am we passed the 'Welcome to Scotland' sign and let out a cheer. We knew that we were nearly at our 1st stop off and closer to getting our heads down for the night. Our 1st mammal of the trip was as usual a **Rabbit** feeding away on a floodlit grassy verge and 2 minutes later at 1am we arrived at the Dumfries Travelodge....Phew! After I'd hauled all our bags out of the boot and dragged them over to the entrance Lyca finally had a wee outside, so we were safe to go in. Up in the room Lyca guzzled 2 bowls of water and then took pride of place on the bed while we got ready. I think we must've gone out like lights and slept like the dead because the next thing we knew was my alarm going off at 7am.

Peering out of the window I could see it was a sunny day, so Wendy was going to be pleased with that. I took Lyca outside and had a look around to see what I could find. I managed to add **Jackdaw, Rook, Song Thrush, Wren, Wood Pigeon, Blue Tit, Goldcrest, Dunnock** and **Swallow** to our list all in and around the car park. I brought Lyca back up to the room and Wendy put her breakfast out for her, which she duly turned her nose up at and went back to sleep. While Wendy was getting ready I took the opportunity to get petrol as well as taking advantage of the offer of 2 bottles of Ribena for £2 :D. As I looked up I noticed some **Lapwing** flying around and also that it was starting to cloud over already.....Boooooooooo :(When I got back to the room Wendy was nearly ready but Lyca's breakfast was still uneaten, so it looked like it was going to have to come with us and hopefully get eaten later. We had a quick cereal bar to keep us going until we could get some proper food later, which we hopefully wouldn't have to wait too long for.

It was 8.12am when we drove away from the Travelodge and we had a long day ahead of us. We needed to be at Ord Cottage earlier than usual for our Tesco delivery at 8pm, so we'd have to keep an eye on the time and not overstay anywhere. The problem was that we didn't want to sacrifice any of the places we planned to visit, as they all had their merits. Wendy was trying to convince me to ditch off Ken-Dee, as it seemed to be a lot of wasted time and energy for just one bird, which could be a hit and miss. There was no way I was going to do that as it was summer and there should be loads to see that we don't normally in March. There was a **Carrion Crow** at the side of the road and Wendy spotted a **Sand Martin** colony zooming around and going in and out of their nest holes in the banks of the River Nith. Next we had a **Chaffinch** flying over the road, our 1st **Common Buzzard** of the trip, **Swifts**, a **Mute Swan** at Inn on the Loch, **Starlings** and **Oystercatcher**.

I parked up in the car park next the Galloway Lodge in Gatehouse of Fleet at 8.54am and with 6 minutes to kill before it opened we took a wander down to the river. We kept our fingers crossed for Dipper and Kingfisher but only saw **Robin** and **Great Tit** down there. The sound all around us was of baby Blue and Great Tits, which we'd got used to at home with our nest box having successfully fledged a family of Great Tits. On the way back I picked up a **Nuthatch** on call, we heard **Siskins** and Wendy spotted a **Treecreeper** in the Woods. It was now gone 9am, so Wendy rushed off to get us some food from our favourite café. She came back with her usual supply of chutney as well as a cheese and tomato toastie and cappuccino for her and a sausage bap for meOm nom nom :). The food was as good as ever and went down a treat, which was a good job too because it was the only decent meal we were going to have all day! Feeling

suitably fuelled and ready to go I headed off for the short drive to our 1st stop of the day.



Carstramon Wood

It was 9.40am when we arrived at Carstramon Woods and luckily it looked as though we were the only ones there. We were hopeful of finding all the summer migrants we were after in there, as it hadn't let us down in the past, so it's always worth a visit. It was also a place for Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary Butterflies, which we'd never had a good view of before, but with the sun firmly locked behind the clouds the chances of that were looking doubtful. Lyca looked pleased to be let out to stretch her legs and we all started to walk up the hill through the woods, which felt like harder work than it should've been. We were still near the bottom when we heard a **Blackcap** singing and then we heard a very weird Chaffinch type call and knew that it was one of our 3 target birds. We didn't have to look far before we spotted a lovely female **Redstart**, who didn't seem too happy with our presence and obviously had a nest somewhere nearby. I grabbed a quick record shot of her before we left her alone and carried on walking up the hill.



Redstart

Next up we had a **Spotted Flycatcher**, heard **Great-spotted Woodpecker** and **Willow Warbler** and saw **Wren** and **Mistle Thrush**. Further up we spotted a small Warbler flitting about high in the branches of a tree, so thought we'd better stop to check it out. When we finally got a view of it we were pleased to see that it was the 2nd of our target birds, a **Wood Warbler** :). Last time we'd been there in June we'd heard a few of them in there singing but this time around they were very quiet and keeping a low profile so we'd been lucky to see that one. We only had one more bird to find and carried on adding **Pheasant** to our list. By the time we'd nearly reached the top of the hill we heard another weird call and raised our bins to look at another bird high up in the branches. Finally we'd ticked off our 3 target birds and added **Pied Flycatcher** to our list, so we could now relax and enjoy the rest of the walk.



Pied Flycatcher

Lyca was obviously loving all the smells in the woods and ran around with her tail wagging.



Happy dog

As if we hadn't been lucky enough already we both heard a distant but far reaching call we'd been hoping for all summer and turned to look at each other to happily call, "**Cuckoo!**" Yes! We headed back down the hill hearing **Chiffchaff** and finally seeing some day flying moths near the bottom. There were loads of them, as well as midgies, but just as last time they were all just **Silver-ground Carpets**. The sun hadn't put in appearance, so we'd missed out on our Butterfly but it didn't matter too much because I had other sites pencilled in for them up in the Highlands. Back at the car it was 10.38am and we'd only spent just under an hour in the woods and had found every bird we'd gone there for, so we headed off to chance our luck at the next place.

Driving over the Laurieston road always feels like an eternity with surprisingly little wildlife to be seen.



On the way to Laurieston

The best we usually come up with is Grey Wagtail at a small bridge over a stream. The last time we'd done it in June we'd had what disappointingly turned out to be loads of Common Heath Moths after thinking they could've been Dingy Skipper Butterflies.....Doh! This time there wasn't even any Moths flying about and no Grey Wag either :(.

Approaching Laurieston, which is Red Kite central, we had a **Meadow Pipit** with food in its beak, **Magpie** and a juvenile **Wheatear**, which is always nice to see.

As we got nearer we saw our 1st **Red Kite** of what we hoped would be many, **Skylark**, **Curlew** and a male **Reed Bunting**. We drove through Laurieston without seeing any more Red Kites, which was odd and finally turned off and headed down the track to our next stop. We heard a **Sedge Warbler** singing but hidden out of sight in some bushes and had a Buzzard sitting on a post ridiculously close to the car. As usual it flew off before I could even think of grabbing my camera though.....Urrghhhhh! A **Jay** flew across the track in front of us and I parked up in the Ken-Dee car park next to a van at 11.15am. This was the walk Wendy wasn't convinced we should do, as it takes up a lot of time and adds just 1 bird we wouldn't get anywhere else. She was especially worried we'd be wasting our time with it being summer when the birds would be breeding and possibly not visiting the feeders around the hides. I still wanted to at least try as the woods on the way should be interesting and it would be the last walk Lyca was going to get before we started the long drive up to Feshiebridge. We needed to tire her out so she'd behave in the back for a few hours, so it was worth it for that if nothing else.

We set off down the footpath hearing a **Whitethroat's** scratchy song and saw loads of **Black-headed Gulls** down on the pool at the bottom of the hill on our right. Wendy all of a sudden squeaked, "**Shrew!**" and pointed at the grass next to the path. I couldn't see it for toffee but she'd seen it cross the path in front of us and still had it in view and it was making its way up the side of the path. Eventually I spotted it and amazingly I'd brought a 2nd camera with my macro lens attached just in case, so I was really happy to have the chance of my 1st ever

photo of a Shrew. I got myself poised and ready with my camera and watched the little blighter bombing around all over the place. No wonder I've never taken a Shrew photo before they are like Mice on speed!



Shrew

By then Lyca had spotted it too and was on her back legs dancing at it.....Hahaha! After that we headed off again but Wendy all of a sudden started to get paranoid about the van in the car park because we'd left all our money in the car. The thought also unnerved me, so being safe rather than sorry I left Wendy with the cameras and Lyca and ran back up to grab the rucksack. The last thing we needed was to have the car broken into and all our money and cards stolen before we'd even started our holiday! Having the rucksack on my back meant that my cameras would keep slipping off my shoulders but it was better than having to go home broke! We carried on feeling much more relaxed and heard **Redpoll** overhead. After all our worries about having our money stolen it turned out that the occupant of the van was actually a middle-aged woman who'd emerged to go for a walk. We rolled our eyes and shook our heads at the realisation that we needn't have worried after all. Good old paranoia.....Urrghhhh! Further down we had a **Dunnock** and a pair of **Bullfinches** but there was no Grey Wag down at the stream at the bottom. We decided not to bother with the 1st hide and to head straight to the 2nd, which was further away but where we'd had our target birds in March and was through some nice looking woodland.

We went through the gate and started to walk through the woods towards the hide picking up a **Roe Deer**, a flock of **Long-tailed Tits** and a **Common White Wave Moth**.



Dogs first

When we reached the hide Wendy said, "We're wasting our time doing this you know there won't be anything here especially not Willow Tit", opened the door and went inside. That comment was quickly followed by, "**Willow Tit!**" Hahahaha.....wasting our time hey? There was one right outside the hide on the feeder again, so I made some suitably smart arsed comments and she had to eat her words :P. I got into position and fired off some shots of the bird while Wendy went over to the other side to scan Loch Ken.



Loch Ken

On 1st glances there was nothing but very noisy Black-headed Gulls and loads of young ones in various stages of development, which was disappointing. Luckily after a while a **Little Grebe** popped up, a **Mallard** swam out of some reeds and some **Canada Geese** poked their heads up above the long grass around the edge. While I was taking pictures to the sound of another Sedge Warbler, which was singing just outside the hide something caught my eye on the ground under the feeder. When I looked down I saw a **Vole** (Bank maybe?) stuffing its face with the spillage of food created by the birds. I called Wendy over to have a look and grabbed a quick shot of that too, which was tricky to say the least. It was

impossible to angle the camera down through the window to get it in the shot plus there was grass in the way of getting a clear shot.



Vole

Wendy went back to see if she could find anything else while I continued to try and get a decent Willow Tit shot.



Willow Tit

She found some **Teal** but there wasn't anything else and she started to get twitchy about getting up to the cottage in time.

The sun had come out by the time we headed back and it wasn't long before we were absolutely boiling having dressed for the cooler temperatures earlier in the day. We had to take our coats off but were still sweating buckets as we walked back up the hill to the car park. Depressingly we didn't find any interesting Butterflies, Moths or Dragonflies, which I'd hoped to during the walk.

We were back at the car in time for lunch at 1.22pm and after having a drink Lyca finally ate her breakfast while we had a packet of crisps and cereal bar each. While we ate our measly snack we watched a few Red Kites flying over but there was nowhere near as many as there'd been on our visit in March. I had a look at my Fitbit and we'd done 15,500 steps, which was enough to keep Lyca happy for the rest of the journey. We left at 1.34pm and no wonder we'd been hot walking back, the temperature in my car was reading 18c! As I drove off we noticed a **Grey Heron** on Loch Ken and no sooner had I started than I had to stop to check my front left wheel, as there was a stone in the disk.

After clearing all the slow section we eventually got onto the motorway at 2.50pm and could finally start making some progress.....Phew! Wendy laughed as we approached the amusing phallic shaped plantation and even tried to grab a quick pic of it, failing quite miserably :P.



Spot the subject?

I don't know why but when we get onto the Perthshire Tourist Route it always feels like we're almost there. In reality we're still hours away and nowhere near where we're going! We had a **Common Sandpiper** on the banks of a river but having hoped for a hunting Short-eared Owl, given the good conditions and extended daylight hours, we disappointingly didn't see any :(We reached the Amulree Road by 4.33pm and added **Redshank** but failed to see any Black Grouse. We'd been so lucky last time that I suppose we probably won't see them there again for ages! I stopped in a layby by the river where Lyca had a huge drink and I let her out for a wee. Wendy was starting to feel a bit hungry, tired and generally ropey but mainly she just needed some food and a wee herself. I reckoned Kenmore was as good a place as any to stop off at but we had to get there first! I turned the corner to start the steep climb up the hill and we had another Common Sand and our 1st **Red Grouse** of the trip.

After coming down the equally as steep other side we drove into Kenmore at 5.08pm and headed straight over to the Hotel where the public available toilets and small shop are. We were very surprised to see that there were people and cars parked in every available space in the area. It was absolutely heaving! I have no idea what the event was but it looked like it could possibly have been a triathlon or something. I had to let Wendy out to go to the WC's and drove off to find a place to pull into further down the road, hoping that she'd be able to find me. Wendy had come out and noticed how small not to mention busy the shop was and decided that her chances of finding something to eat in there were slim so went straight to find me. Although she has no navigational skills whatsoever she eventually found me and announced that she still needed to get some food.....Urrghhhhh! This meant that I still needed to make another detour, which was wasting more valuable time. We still had another place to visit that could potentially produce a lifer for us both as well as needing to get to the cottage for 8pm.....Aarrghhhhhh! The pressure was on but luckily Aberfeldy was nearby and I dropped Wendy off outside the Co-op. She emerged very quickly with a reduced pastry to share, which was just enough to get rid of her shakes and would hopefully keep us going until later.

Although Wendy wasn't convinced I reckoned that we still had enough time for our last plan and we headed off again at 5.35pm. Driving towards Pitlochry Wendy looked down at the River Garry and saw a bright white blob, which could only have been a male **Goosander**. Next were some **Goldeneye** and then we heard a sound, which we'd love to hear again back at home but probably never will. It was the unmistakable song of a **Yellowhammer** and very nice it was too. By then we were getting very bored and Wendy had decided to be annoying and kept saying, "Are we there yet?" like a child, which wasn't helping! At 5.57pm we cheered as we reached another milestone, the 'Welcome to the Cairngorms' sign.....Phew! We started to see **Common Gulls** in the fields and could see that there was still snow in the corries on the tops of the mountains in the distance. The next step was to get to those mountains where we were finally going to end up....Yawn!

It felt at times like we'd never get there but we'd made it and I parked up in a car park in an area we'd never been to before at 6.33pm. There'd been an Icterine Warbler hanging around at Laggan Community Woodland, 50 meters west of the toilet block, for about 3 weeks and all the recent reports, including the one from the day before, had said that it frequently sang from the top of a tall birch tree, so you couldn't miss it.....Happy days :). To get a lifer before arriving at the cottage would be great but we were short on time and hoped we didn't have to wait too long. Luckily the cottage was only about 30 minutes away maximum, so we had a bit of time on our side. We'd passed the toilet block on the corner, as we'd turned in to park up, so it was just a case of working out where to look.



Laggan

We took a wander down the path and ended up in the Community Woodland where Wendy pointed out that we were looking in the wrong place if it was 50 meters west of the toilets.....Oooooops! When we got back to the playground 3 others with bins had appeared and were all looking intently into one of the trees. Wendy was keen to know what they were looking at and slowly made her way over to them in the hope of getting a lead. When she was close enough to hear them she realized that they were just American tourists admiring some baby Great Tits being fed and her heart sank. They eventually turned around and she asked them if they'd seen anything just for the sake of completeness. Although they knew about the bird they confirmed that they hadn't seen it and were just trying to get used to all the new birds they'd never seen before.....Doh! That wasn't quite what Wendy wanted to hear but it could've been worse and at least they weren't filling their boots while we stood like a pair of plonkers not noticing it! I was now bursting, so I left Wendy and Lyca to keep looking and ran up the road to the toilets. On my way back I noticed that the grass at the side of the road had been flattened and wondered if that was where everyone had been seeing the bird from, it looked feasible as it looked over the top of the trees.



It's somewhere round here!

Wendy was standing back at the car because she'd started to be eaten alive by midgies down in the trees, so after telling her we both went for a look at my newly discovered spot. Typically there was still neither sight nor sound of the Icterine Warbler and Wendy was getting twitchy about the time, so we called it a day.

We left at 7.03pm, which would give us just the right amount of time to get to the cottage and unpack. On the way Wendy got me to pull over, so she could get a photo of Ruthven Barracks, which looked very impressive in the evening sunlight.



Ruthven Barracks

At 7.35pm we pulled up in the familiar surroundings of Ord Cottage and admired the river at the bottom of the garden. We couldn't wait to get in and unpack so we could finally chill out and crossed our fingers that there was no student in there revising this time! When we opened our doors to get out we were greeted by a black Cocker Spaniel who was very nice and very friendly. Lyca didn't seem to think so though and barked and barked in the back seat. We really needed it to go away but when Wendy noticed that it appeared to have had a stroke in the past, as one side of its face was droopy, we just didn't have the heart to shoo it off. Looking around we saw a bloke who we presumed to be the gardener busy strimming the long and overgrown grass outside Grandad's Bothy next door having already done ours. He wasn't going to notice us in a hurry, so in the end I had to carry Lyca up to the house (so she wouldn't be horrible to the Spaniel) while the Spaniel followed us like it thought it was coming in with us! What is it with that place? With Lyca and Wendy inside I set about lugging all our cases and bags up the path, which reminded me of that particular downfall of staying there! Absolutely knackered I went in to find Wendy already unpacking but not so happy with the cleanliness of the bathroom this time around. It'd been spot on last time, so what'd gone wrong? Apart from that everything else was fine but there was a pair of tick removers in the living room, which made us worry slightly. Wendy cleaned the chalky stuff off the bath, sink and toilet in the bathroom and then realized that something wasn't quite right. She remembered the bathroom well after the incident giving Lyca a shower and getting sprayed with freezing cold water in the process but where was the shower? More to the

point why was the bathroom totally different? The owner had told me that she'd run out time decorating and that the shower room still needed painting, and when Wendy had finished cleaning she walked past a room she didn't recognize with a shower, sink and toilet in it. What the.....? She then clicked and realized that the bathroom had been split into 2 smaller rooms and had only just been done too hence the white chalky stuff all over the bath, sink and taps in the bathroom. The shower room wasn't worth even contemplating using and still needed a lot of refining but it didn't bother us, as long as there was one functioning bathroom we were happy.

After everything was sorted I got a phone call from the Tesco van man. He'd gone past the bridge and needed directions to find the cottage, so instead I ran down to the bridge to wave him in as he drove back. Five minutes later and we had our food supplies, so I set about boiling up some pasta and microwaving a Bolognese sauce pouch. Wendy had bought a load of fresh veggies, so had brought a tin of Lentil Soup with her to rustle up quickly for the 1st night. She'd be making something involving a lot of faff tomorrow to keep her going for the rest of the week. After tea Wendy went for a bath and then phoned her Mum using the house phone, which is an absolute luxury on holiday. Once she'd got through to her Mum she hung up and did last caller display and phoned back on the cottage number :). Now she had it all Wendy had to do was text her to phone and they could have a catch up. Lyca seemed to have settled in and spent the rest of the evening snoring. She was a tired dog alright and when I checked my Fitbit it said I'd done 24,000 steps, which was pretty good going for a travel day! I took Lyca out for a wee at 11.10pm and saw a **Bat** and for the 1st time ever we'd remembered to bring the Bat detector. There were too many midgies to stay out there for long and I was too tired to find out what type anyway, but that could wait until another night. I didn't put the Moth trap out either because I planned a relaxed start for the 1st day and didn't want to have to get up at stupid o'clock to empty it. After that it was 11.15pm and we all headed off to bed and slept like logs.....Zzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Sunday 19th June

It was 8.25am when we finally woke up having had more than enough sleep. It was stiflingly hot in the house with the heating on even though Wendy had woken up about 3 times in the night because it was freezing. We were planning a lazy start to the day, so we leisurely had breakfast and watched the bird feeders out of the window. There was a good supply of bird food in the utility room, which would keep the birds fed for the duration of our stay, so we didn't need to buy any more. All we had was Chaffinches and **Coal Tits** but going by past experience of the cottage we weren't expecting anything interesting like Crestie or Red Squirrel anyway. While she had the chance Wendy set about making something for her tea as well as making the sarnies for our lunch but I was starting to get itchy feet.

By the time she was ready to go out it was already 11.10am, which was far too late by my book and it was raining lightly. After we'd failed at Laggan the night before I reckoned it was worth another shot, seeing as the bird was being seen daily and we might have just been there too late in the day yesterday. Our 1st stop was Loch Insh for an Osprey fix though seeing as we'd been too early to see any returning during our March trip. Five minutes later I pulled up in the layby and we had a scan of the nest. The female was sitting there but as usual we

weren't there to witness any action like the male coming in with a fish or something.....Typical! We got out of the car and had a wander down the footpath to the waters edge but there was no point hanging around, as the female continued to sit motionless and the view wasn't any better from there anyway.



Loch Insh

Back at the car it was 11.30pm and I drove away with both of us hedging bets that as soon as we'd gone the male would fly in with a fish of better still catch one right in front of where we'd just been standing.....Urrghhhh! Ah well, maybe we'd have better luck at our 2nd visit to Laggan?

By then I'd noticed that my sat nav wasn't taking me on the route we'd gone on last night and that it was taking us on a longer one. This annoyed me slightly because I just wanted to get there as quickly as possible but the only consolation was that this route was more scenic, so we just had to sit back and enjoy the view. While I was having a go at the sat nav about its rubbish choices something caught my eye in the road up ahead. When I looked my eyes nearly popped out of my head and I shrieked, "**Stoooooooooat!**" to Wendy. She was equally as gob smacked and we watched it bounce down the side of the road, head towards a free-range egg hut and then disappear through some railings down to the river. WOW! :O! We certainly weren't expecting that and if my sat nav hadn't been so stupid we wouldn't have seen it at all! I apologised to it and forgave it this time around but that's not to say that it's always right :P.

Still buzzing from seeing a Stoat on our 1st day in the Highlands I pulled up in the car park at Laggan again at 12.05pm.



Round II

Wendy looked through the windscreen and squealed, “**Red Squirrel!**” and pointed it out to me. It came down a tree and went onto the ground and headed towards a picnic table in the playground.....Nice :). We watched it skip off down the path and disappear into the woods leaving us pretty chuffed at having now seen Stoat and Red Squirrel on our 1st day :). As we aimlessly wandered about listening for an unusual call or song all we heard was a **Raven** flying overBooooooooooooo :(It was a new bird for the trip though but just not what we had in mind! We also found a **Clouded-border Moth** in the woods but by then we were fed up and it was lunchtime, so we headed back up to the car. After we’d eaten our food Wendy went over to the WC’s and I carried on scanning the trees. I heard something I didn’t recognize, so had a fresh burst of enthusiasm to stick it out and continue our search. When Wendy came back I told her and we went out for another look around. A couple of other birders had turned up by then and Wendy asked had they had any joy. Apparently they’d seen the bird 3 weeks ago and had come back for another look, as they were passing. They hadn’t heard it either but Wendy overheard their conversation with a bloke in his garden over the fence, so did a bit of earwigging. He was telling them that he’d heard it singing that morning and pointed over to the trees nearby where it’d supposedly been. We’d been looking in the right place at least but Wendy had become bored by then and took herself off to have a go on the swings.



Oh dear!

As she swung backwards and forwards giggling like a child Lyca, who'd never seen anything like it before, started to go nuts. She looked very excited about the whole thing and was up on her back legs dancing again and trying to get to Wendy.....Hahahahaha! After that we called it a day and had just dipped for the 2nd time on what would've been a lifer for both of us :{.

Feeling a bit deflated we stopped off at the Co-op so Wendy could grab a couple of bits and pieces and then I went back to the cottage so I could get some warmer clothes. It'd become quite chilly by then and I didn't really know where to go next. I suggested going over the road for a wander along the river, which Wendy was keen to do having not done our local walk with me last time. We crossed the road and had a look at the river before carrying on along the footpath. We were lucky to be staying where we were, as you have to pay to use the car park but there were still a few cars in there anyway. Wendy went over to an information board to see what it was all about and called me over. The walk had been turned into the Frank Bruce Sculpture Trail! Apparently he was a local artist who'd created sculptures out of dead tree stumps, which were dotted around on the trail. This was presumably to add a bit of interest for bored children and possibly big kids like Wendy too! The 1st sculpture was just next to us, so we hadn't had to look far!



Sculpture Trail

Carrying on I started to get a bit confused when I realized that we were nowhere near the riverside path and were walking along the bank looking down on it. I seemed to remember walking alongside the river the last time I'd done it and started to look for a path down. I must've gone another way, as there was no other path, so we carried on anyway. It was a nice walk through the top of the woods and at the end of it we came to a field with a gate. Wendy all of a sudden chirped up with, "Hey, look at that....." paused for a second and finished quite casually, as though it was no biggie, with, "**Redstart** on that sculpture's head!" What? She'd found a group of sculptures in the field behind the wall and was just about to point them out to me when she'd spotted the lovely male Redstart sitting on top of one's head.....Hahahahahaha! Brilliant :).



There's a Redstart there somewhere

You can't sniff at a male Redstart, so I raised my camera and started to try for some shots. The bird was quite happy to just sit there but the best I could manage were a few record shots. It was too far away even for my lens and in the end it darted off into the branches of a nearby tree.



Redstart

Once the novelty of another good spot for the day had died down we wandered through the gate and carried on our walk. Eventually the path went down and ended up next to the river, which was more like where we wanted to be.



River Feshie

Yet again though, we wouldn't have seen the Redstart if we'd been down there the whole time. There were loads of Sand Martins zooming around feeding over the water with a few House Martins and Swallows joining in the party too. I thought I'd try to get some shots of them but it was as impossible as ever and I

failed miserably as usual! Although it looked perfect for one we still couldn't pin down a Grey Wag and the only Wagtails down on the banks were just Pied Wags. While I was busy the only other thing Wendy found of note was another Spottedfly. We carried on until we ended up in a field with a dried up riverbed on the left.



Dried up riverbed

Carrying on through the field we heard a **Crossbill** calling and reckoned it was coming from the conifers on top of the hill on the left. We looked and looked but it wasn't until it finally flew that we saw it. Shortly after that 8 more flew out, so there'd been more around than we'd initially thought. We followed the path and found some steps, which lead down to a stream. Wendy glanced down and finally found 2 x **Grey Wagtails** on the stoney beach on the other side, which were both juveniles. I handed Lyca over to her and went down the steps to try to at least get one ½ decent photo for the day's efforts!



Not easy!

I spent a few minutes down there but this was the best shot I came up with as the birds were heading away rather than towards me.



Grey Wagtail

After that, we headed back and Wendy stopped by the river to get some pics. Not a bad walk to have on your doorstep.



Feshie Bridge

It was 3.25pm when we got back and still early enough to go somewhere else. We got into the car and as it was nearby I reckoned we should go to Inshriach Woods, as I had it pencilled in anyway. We'd planned a lazy day, so we weren't surprised that we'd only clocked up 10,100 steps so far, which was pitiful compared to a normal day.

When we arrived it was 3.30pm and instead of going into the woods I wanted to try another route to a stream I'd spotted on the map, which by my reckoning wasn't very far. We set off on the footpath, which skirted around the woods just in time for the weather to take a turn for the worse. It seems that every time we go there it's windy and raining or hailing! The rain, which had initially been light started to get heavier and the wind began to pick up too, so Wendy wasn't happy.

The path started to head uphill through the woods, so hopefully we'd be a bit sheltered in there. We must've been still feeling the effects of the past couple of days because the climb upwards felt very much like hard work. There were moths flying around everywhere and they were so quick we just couldn't get any of them in our bins to see if we could ID them. It was starting to get beyond a joke but although it took ages one of them landed.....Phew! When Wendy saw the huge feathery antennae, she instantly remembered them from our last June trip as **Bordered White Moths**. Job done we carried on the never-ending path upwards noticing the 1000's of **Wood Ants** at the side of the path. It was funny to watch because it was like an Ant highway with one lane going up and the other going down. We found the huge nest they were obviously all coming and going from as well as some Caper poo on the path, which looked very dry and not recent. Wendy was starting to get a bit annoyed with trudging up hill and wondered if we'd gone the wrong way.



Where are we?

After all I'd said that the walk wasn't far but we still hadn't seen any signs of a river. She then had her 1st Karl Pilkington and said, "Why do we need to get to the river anyway, it's not like we've never seen a river before, we were at a river earlier, isn't one river pretty much the same as the other?" Urrghhhh! I had a check of the map on my phone and was relieved to tell her that it wasn't much further away. The path went back into the woods and we started hear the sound of running water, so knew we were nearly there. As we got closer I spotted a camera trap on a tree, which was a bit odd. At the end of the path Wendy kindly commented, "You cant' even see the river from here anyway!" but I had a look around and spotted a bridge, so we headed up to it. We then noticed a load of weird wooden boxes and solar panels dotted about around the river and a board saying, 'Environmental change monitoring' or something to that effect.



Eh?

There was also another camera trap on a tree facing us, so we didn't stick around. Wendy gave it a wave as we walked past and I realized how lucky we'd been to have not needed a wild wee before noticing them.....Hahahahaha! That could've been a bit embarrassing :P. We walked back much quicker than we'd walked there and by then the rain was lashing down. We couldn't see out of our glasses, our bins were all steamed up and practically useless and Wendy's boots were squelching.

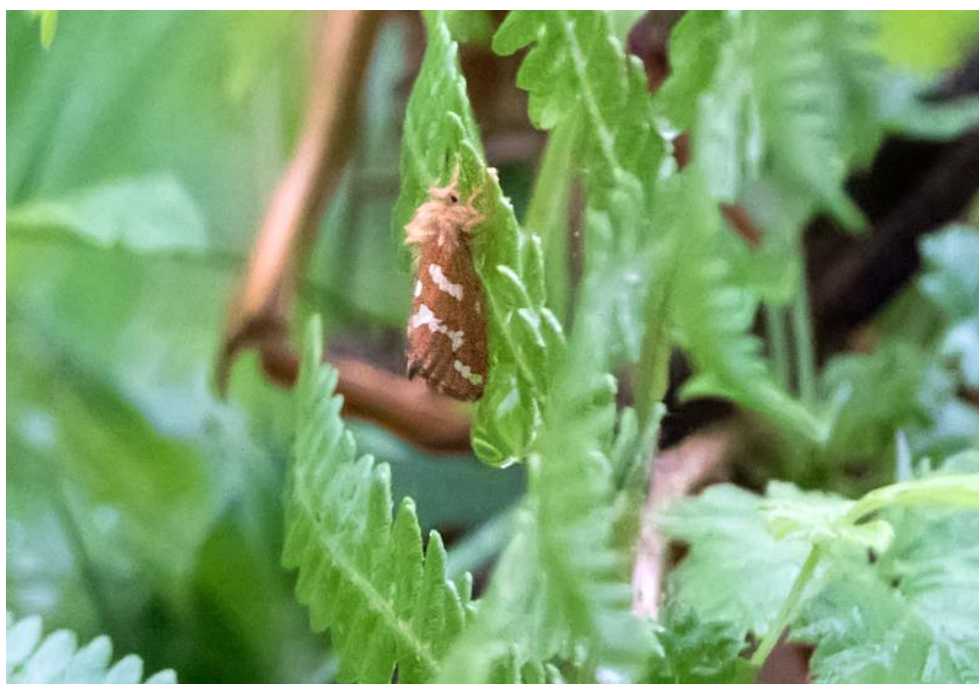


Urrgghhhh!

We were both pleased to get back to the shelter of the car at 5.12pm even though we were literally dripping wet. On the way back we saw something that made us smile. A woman walking a chocolate Cockerpoo like Lyca, so the Cockerpoo invasion has finally crept into Scotland :P.

Back at HQ it was 5.16pm and Wendy put our boots on the radiators to hopefully dry out before the morning. Next she did Lyca's tea, we had ours and then went off for a soak in the bath. When she came back she was in the kitchen and I heard her say, "**** are those Hornets, they're very big AND yellow?" I really

didn't want to hear those words, as the last thing I needed was to open the moth trap (if we got the chance to put it out) and find a pile of moth wings and a load of scary Hornets in it! Uh Oh! I came to the window for a look and could see 2 yellow things flying backwards and forwards over one spot of bracken. They were almost hovering and behaving unlike anything we'd ever seen before. I grabbed my bins and tried to get a view but it was difficult and the best suggestion I had had was Hummingbird Hawk-moth. I went to get my camera instead and when one finally landed I grabbed a quick record shot through the window to see if we could tell what on earth they were. I had a look at the back of my camera and could see that it was obviously a Moth but definitely not a Hummingbird Hawk-moth. Wendy went to get the book and quickly found our weird garden visitor. It was a **Gold Swift Moth** and a lifer for us both too.



Gold Swift

Interestingly they've been recorded flying in the morning and late afternoon with bracken being their food plant, which was spot on!

We finally sat down to chill out and Wendy phoned her Mum to tell her about the day. I had a look at my Fitbit again and it was now on 24,624 steps,, which equated to 9.47 miles, so much for our lazy day! Lyca was absolutely out for the count on the settee and when Wendy walked past and stroked her she noticed that she'd brought a pet Wood Ant home with her. She must've decided that it hadn't been such a good idea after all as it was dead on the sofa, so we can only presume that Lyca had murdered it, maybe it was tickling her too much? When Wendy went back into the kitchen she had another look out of the window and counted 12 Gold Swifts, so there must've been a female around somewhere. While I'd been on my laptop I noticed that the internet kept dropping off and it was doing my head in. I went over for a look and found that the router was plugged in through 3 splitters!!! Absolutely ridiculous. Being in IT I couldn't resist messing around with it all until it was fixedYey :). I'd started to feel a bit peckish and stuck some bread in the toaster. When it popped up it had only been done on one side and the 2 inner elements were dead.....Boooooooooo :(.

Still, at least it ½ worked this time, as last time it didn't work at all. Although it'd been replaced I think it was the exact same model too.....Hahaha :P! There was overnight rain forecast, so I couldn't put the Moth trap out, which was

disappointing, as we'd had some good results last time. I took Lyca out for a wee and saw 2 Bats, so I came in to get the Bat detector but unfortunately it'd been so long since I'd used it I'd totally forgotten how it worked, so I gave up. We were all very tired by then and headed off to bed at 10.20pm.

Monday 20th June

We were up and about at 7.25pm and gutted to find that the forecasted rain hadn't happened, so we could've put the Moth trap out after all.....Grrrrrrrrr! Looking at the weather forecast our hearts sank when we saw that it looked bad for the rest of the week and we didn't know what to do if it turned out to be right. All my plans for the next 2 weeks revolved around Dragonflies and Butterflies, which obviously need light winds and plenty of sun before they fly. This was the whole point in going away in June! As I ate my breakfast I read some reports about where to find some specific Dragonflies, while Wendy was busy making our sarnies in the kitchen. All of a sudden I looked up at the bird feeders and saw, to my total disbelief, a **Crested Tit**! I called it out excitedly to Wendy who came running over in as much shock as I was. By the time she got there it'd flown off but luckily it returned for more food shortly after and she got to see it too. I grabbed my camera and started firing off some record shots and then realized that I should be getting some video. While it was gone I got into position at the window ready for when it returned. I managed to get some video of it, which isn't the best, being on a feeder, but is still my 1st Crestie video. Excitement over we though we'd better start making a move to go out, even though it was cold, grey, overcast and pretty uninspiring outside. After liberally dousing ourselves with our new weapon against midgies 'Smidge' we sprayed Lyca with 'Skin so Soft' to hopefully protect her from them too and headed out into the rain at 9.29am.

Seeing as it wasn't going to be the best day I reckoned we should take a spin out to Lochindorb to try our luck with the breeding Divers, as we didn't even have to get out of the car for that. I needed petrol, so I drove towards Aviemore seeing a Roe Deer amongst the trees at the side of Loch Insh. There were some **Greylag Geese** on the Loch itself but still no sign of any action from the Ospreys. I filled my tank up at the petrol station and headed off to Lochindorb. It's a pleasant drive and not too far away, so we relaxed and enjoyed the view. When Lochindorb came into view we had Red Grouse chicks crossing the road and we weren't even there yet. By the time we got down to the Loch we hadn't seen any more, so they must all have been keeping a low profile. There were Common Sandpiper and a distant **Redshank** down by the waters edge but apart from that it seemed dead. We got out of the car and I let Lyca out for a wee and her traditional paddle and drink from the Loch.



Lochindorb

A further scan produced 100's of Greylags in the water and grazing in the surrounding fields and then I pulled out a single **Barnacle Goose** from amongst them. We got back into the car and continued the drive to the end, stopping to scan for divers at intervals. By the time we got to the end we hadn't had any joy and Wendy was a bit frustrated at having not had enough opportunities to look by being in the car. I tried to convince her that if there'd been any divers out there we'd have seen them but she was having none of it. I turned around at the end and said that I'd pull into a layby so she could scan to her hearts content and I'd input the birds we'd seen into Birdtrack, so she seemed happier. There was a Common Sand right by the side of the road, so I pulled in to get a shot, while Wendy scanned the Loch.



Common Sandpiper

Next we spotted a **Kestrel** hovering over a field. The weather had completely turned around by then and was now really sunny and 17c, so we were hopeful that we could get out for a walk next. I passed the plantation, parked up and got

my phone out to do Birdtrack, leaving Wendy to her own devices. Not long after and she was onto something! It was a tiny black blob with white on it right at the far side of the Loch, which didn't really inspire me to show much interest. I love a Diver but only if I can actually see it! Fortunately the **Black-throated Diver** started to get closer and I reckoned that if I waited a while it might even get close enough for a shot. The signs at the side of the road made me laugh though. They were warning people not to disturb the Divers as they often come really close to the road.....Hahahahahaha not for us they don't! Although it was getting 'relatively' closer it was still just too far away for me to get anything other than an extreme record shot but it was still very nice to see in its lovely summer plumage.



Black-throated Diver

Eventually it swam behind a bank and when I tried to move the car in the hope of catching up with it it'd vanished! We didn't see it again, so it looked like we'd been lucky to see it at all and with that we left for our next stop. Normally I'd go to Findhorn Valley then Loch Ruthven but for some reason this time I decided we'd do it backwards.

Driving through Carrbridge Wendy spotted another Cockerpoo and this one was a gingery colour and pulling on its lead just like Lyca. I made a quick diversion to the WC's and just after setting off again at 12.05pm it started to rain. It didn't last any longer than about 5 seconds but further on when we were on the A9 there was a heavy shower.....Urrghhhh! Luckily Scottish weather is very sporadic and after the rain the sun was out again but the temperature had dropped to 13c.

When we arrived at Loch Ruthven at 12.39pm we instantly saw 2x Ospreys flying over the Loch.



Loch Ruthven car park

We were starting to feel quite hungry, so I grabbed our lunch from the back and we started to eat our sarnies while watching the Ospreys. We were caught completely off guard when they started fishing, something we always manage to miss out on witnessing. There's usually something blocking the view at the crucial moment but had we been down by the water on the path we'd have had great close in views this time. That was it for me, I kicked myself into gear and grabbed my camera to go down there, leaving my ½ eaten sarnie on the dash. Why hadn't I done it sooner!!? What an idiot! I wanted a shot of an Osprey fishing much more than I wanted my lunch but unfortunately I'd not acted quickly enough and by the time I got into position they'd both flown off! Grrrrrrrr! I could've kicked myself for being too slow and yet again missing a great opportunity :(I gave up in a huff and went back to the car and on the way I found an absolutely classic scene.....



Maybe the person was foreign? :P

Back at the car I finished my lunch and we watched a **Red Admiral Butterfly** battling against the wind, which was picking up big time. When we looked up we

realized why, there was a massive dirty black cloud heading our way.....Urrghhhh!

Hoping we could beat the rain we headed off at 1.05pm along the path through the woodland towards the hide. There were quite a lot of midgies about, so we just hoped that Smidge did what it said on the tin! Wendy pointed out the Arctic Starflowers (Chickweed-wintergreen), which we'd seen for the 1st time on our last June trip and stopped to look at some other unusual looking plants.



Arctic Starflower

When we got to the hide I let Wendy go in 1st and stayed outside with Lyca watching a Blue Tit bringing food to a nest box on a tree nearby. She wasn't long and quickly emerged saying, "**Slavonian Grebe** on the left, about ½ way out and there's another miles off on the right." Goodo, that's what we'd gone there for, so I handed Lyca over and went in for a look myself. It took me ages to find the Slavs and they were much too distant for any photos and seeing as there was absolutely nothing else of interest out there I didn't hang around either. One of the Slavs was heading towards the beach, so I reckoned we should go there instead and wait for it to appear, so I could hopefully get some shots of it.



The beach

Down at the beach we waited and I sat with my camera poised grabbing some distant records shots.



Slavonian Grebe

Wendy heard someone say, "I recognize that dog!" from the footpath behind us but didn't think much of it. It was probably someone who we'd come across somewhere along the line who Lyca had barked at or something. I turned around and looked at the people and then carried on watching the Slav until all of a sudden I had a brainwave and said, "Hang on, was that Fred?" It seemed a bit far fetched that another birder from the IOM was there at the same time as us but the more I thought about it the more I was convinced. It would explain the comment about Lyca too, so Wendy suggested going after him and rushed off telling me to hurry up. I thought he'd be long gone and didn't see the point but as we approached the car park we saw a car pulling out with a Manx registration....OMG!!!! Wendy upped the pace and got there in time only to find Fred sitting in the car with the window down and his wife standing outside

directing him out of his space....Unbelievable! Wendy went straight over to say, "Hello" while I caught up with her and we all laughed as to what a small world it was. He said he'd recognized Wendy, then Lyca and had made his comment as he went past. He'd then seen me taking pics but we hadn't turned round, so he thought maybe he was wrong. He'd been up in Scotland for the past 4 weeks and had been all over the place enjoying the wonderful weather of the previous weeks. What were the chances of us all being in the same place at the same time though? :P. More to the point it seemed as though the majority of birders from the Island were all up in Scotland at the same time. We were scattered around The Highlands, The Hebs, Skye and Shetland leaving just 3 men standing back at home.....Hahahahaha! After a chat Fred had to go because another car wanted to get out and he was blocking the way, so we had to say, "Bye!" Looking back at the photo I took of the car park when we got there you can clearly see a Manx reg car. Dohhh.....what idiots!!

We'd just got back into the car and were about to leave when we looked up and saw that one of the Ospreys had returned. Thinking that I may be in for a 2nd chance at getting an action shot I switched off the engine and we all got out again. This time we didn't dawdle and hurried straight back down to the waters edge only to find that it wasn't in any hurry and was still miles away over the hills in the distance.....Grrrrrrr! I should've known it was too good to be true and felt like a bit of a kick in the teeth, but I should be used to it by now! There were some birds kicking off over the field on the far side of the Loch and when we looked we found 2x **Peregrines** in hot pursuit of a Lapwing :O! They seemed to be practicing their moves on the Lapwing and didn't appear to be trying to catch it, so maybe they were young ones. We watched them taunting it as it twisted and turned in mid air to avoid their talons. At one point we held our breath as some feathers flew and the Lapwing turned upside down and tumbled downwards behind some trees and out of view. I don't think it'd been killed but Wendy wasn't so sure and the Peregrines blasted off and were gone. Another bird that had also gone was the Osprey and while we'd been watching the action it'd cleared right off. We headed back to the car hearing **Greenfinch** flying over on the way and left for the 2nd time at 2.12pm.

Our next plan was to visit Findhorn Valley but we didn't hold much hope of seeing anything there. We had a chance of hearing or possibly, if we were lucky, seeing Ring Ouzels but it was a bad time of year to see the Eagles there. We saw a Red Kite over some fields which is a bit unusual in the Highlands and then turned a corner to find a Police bike with it's lights flashing parked across the middle of the road.....Uh Oh! What'd happened? Our initial thought were that there'd been an accident but the Officer came over and told us that there was a wide load on its way and parked us up in a layby behind some other cars. A while later 2 x Police cars came through followed by 2 of the biggest lorries we've ever seen carrying wind turbine parts.



Woah!

One of the lorries was carrying just a single sail and seeing it lying flat like that really emphasized its sheer enormity! The convoy was completed with a car from the wind turbine company and then the Police Officer gave us the nod that we could carry on. He certainly hadn't been joking when he said there was a wide load coming and it's mental to think they had chosen the singletrack roads to transport it all on!

Our unexpected delay over we carried on with Wendy spotting some **Red-legged Partridge** at the side of road. The Farr Road was busier than we'd ever seen it and normally we only ever see a couple of other cars, if any. The car ahead of us pulled over and had a chat to the driver of a car parked up in layby and then they both left, with one in front of us and one behind. This struck us as more than a bit odd especially as we were literally in the middle of nowhere. Wendy was the 1st to comment and said, "Hmmmmmm that's a bit weird" to which I replied, "Yeah we're now perfectly ambushed." Maybe I've watched too many documentaries on the special forces! Wendy didn't need to hear that at all and started to think of all sorts, so she couldn't wait to get off the road. Luckily and not exactly surprisingly nothing dodgy happened so we carried on still wondering what the 2 cars had been up to.

When we turned off and started heading through Findhorn valley all we could see was grey clouds up ahead and that was where we were going :(We heard the now familiar sound of a Common Sand down on the river bank and Wendy spotted a **Mountain Hare** in its brown summer coat amongst the scree at the side of the road. It then started to rain, so when we parked up in the car park at 3.06pm we were anything but raring to go. We wound the windows down for a look and a listen and Lyca was making excited noises and wriggling around in the back thinking that she was going for a walk. It was really windy, freezing cold and wet, so we decided not to bother sticking around. After a quick scan and finding absolutely nothing at all Wendy commented that even the Goats were nowhere to be seen. Not wanting to leave completely empty handed she had another look and eventually found a couple of **Wild Goats** in the distance. We'd been hoping for Dipper and Common Tern there but we'd failed to see either and we realized that, just like we'd found in March, Dippers were proving very tricky to find. Right at the last minute at the end of the road I spotted a

Common Tern flying up the river. This was lucky, as I was just about to turn left and start driving away from it....Phew! I also spotted a Red Squirrel on a log pile in one of the gardens, which neither of us was expecting. We still had some time to kill and was way too early to call it a day, so I reckoned the Dragonfly pools at a reserve in Aviemore were worth a quick visit just in case the sun poked out for a few minutes!

We arrived in the car park at Craigellachie at 4.01pm and Wendy desperately needed to find a WC. We'd seen signs for them on the way into the car park and sure enough there was an arrow pointing towards the Youth Hostel next door. She wandered over to the front door and was faced with about 20 pairs of walking shoes and could hear loads of people inside. Not fancying walking through them all she quickly turned around and decided to hang on. We walked under the bridge and into the woods where there was loads of midgies out.....Uh Oh! Over at the 1st pool there were 3 x Common Sands making a right racket but absolutely no sign of any insects flying, apart from the midgies that is!



1st pool

We heard a call we recognized but couldn't place it but we knew it was either Redstart or Pied Fly. These are birds that we don't see or hear enough of for them to be familiar to us but when we looked round we found a nice male Pied Flycatcher, which vanished into the hole in a nest box. Looking around there were nest boxes everywhere, which was great to see and most of them were occupied too. We carried on to the 2nd pool and yet again there was no sign of anything flying.....Booooooooo :(.



2nd pool

Wendy couldn't hang on any longer and having checked that the coast was clear she nipped behind a bush :P. I then heard a call I recognized and looked up to see a **Tree Pipit** in the branches of one of the nearby trees.....Nice :). We were now making our way up the hill and Wendy suddenly stopped and chucked another Karl Pilkington! "You said we weren't we weren't going far, I haven't brought any water and I'm really thirsty!" followed by "It's alright for you, you never need a drink!" and "You must be a camel or something!" Hahahahahaha! She was right though, I hadn't mentioned that we were going up the hill and only mentioned going to check the pools. The thing is that she'd forgotten that the main point of going there was to check the bog pools at the top of the hill for my most wanted Dragonfly – the Golden-ringed Dragonfly! This is why I'd wanted to go away in June and was what I wanted most for my birthday but unfortunately the sun had gone in again, so it was looking pretty doubtful.

We pressed on despite her protests and walked up through the woods seeing more Pied Flies using the nest boxes to add a bit of interest. There were a good few Moths flying around and when we found a small micro that appeared to be red we were keen to pin it down. We followed it about until it finally settled and I could get a record shot to enable us to ID it later. It was an attractive little Moth called *Eulia ministrana* and we were glad we'd put in the effort, as micros are often overlooked due to their size, or should that be lack of it!



Eulia ministrana

When we came out at the top of the woods we just had a short walk left to get to the bog pools. It was getting quite late and we were both feeling a bit tired by then, so when we got there and there was no signs of any life it was disappointing. Yet again we'd put the effort in and come away empty handed but I dare say that if I couldn't care less about Golden-ringed Dragonflies they'd probably have been everywhere! Wendy was squatting down stroking Lyca and in doing so she was horrified to find a tick.....Nooooooooo! Luckily it was dead and had already dropped off, so she was able to just pull it out of her fur but it was a gross find nevertheless. There was no point hanging around and we headed straight back after that, as the sun looked as though it wasn't coming out again in a hurry. It felt very muggy and sticky on the way back and Wendy hoped that it didn't turn into a thunderstorm. By the time we got back to the car it was 5.59pm and we made a beeline for home.

It was 6.15pm when we arrived back at HQ and Wendy went straight into the kitchen to get Lyca her tea. While she did that I went out to fill the bird feeders up and also to set a branch up, so I could get a better shot of the Crestie, if it ever came back. I had a look at my Fitbit and saw that we'd only done 14,000 steps, which wasn't many at all but the weather had been pretty rubbish, so it wasn't surprising. After tea we had baths and I settled down to watch the Football, which Wendy was delighted about.....NOT! Lyca spent the rest of the night sleeping while Wendy thought she'd do some washing. Walking past the machine I noticed that the ball of liquid was still sitting on top, which meant that she'd forgotten to put it in.....Doh! After it'd finished she had to put it on again for a quick 30 minute cycle and this time she remembered to put the detergent in. She wasn't having a very good evening at all and was running around frantically trying to find her makeup bag. She hadn't brought make up but wanted to redo her nail varnish, which had started to chip. According to her she'd looked everywhere and couldn't find it, so I offered to help. I had no idea what the bag looked like but I walked into the kitchen and saw one sitting on the table and said, "What, this one?" Wendy, who'd obviously just had her 2nd senior moment shook her head in disbelief and sat down to do her nails and I (smugly) resumed my seat in front of the TV.

A bit later on Wendy started to try and finish off our Tesco order, which we'd booked for Friday. We planned to get as much stuff in as we could to take to our next cottage, as we were unsure how good the local shop was in Strontian. We couldn't get anything fresh, frozen or that needed to be kept cold, so I just hoped that it was good enough to have Lactofree milk and Wendy crossed her fingers for some kind of vegetable selection. That kind of narrowed our order down a bit and seeing as there wasn't going to be much space in the car either it meant that she couldn't get anything too big, so we'd have to hope we could get bottled water when we arrived too. After staring at the tiny list scratching her head and getting nowhere she finally gave up and decided to leave it till later. The forecast was for more overnight rain, so yet again I couldn't put the Moth trap out. It was looking as though we'd only be able to get it out on Wednesday night and we started to wonder why we'd bothered even bringing it. Wendy had noticed that despite using Smidge she'd acquired some midgie bites and after a quick look she found that she had a grand total of 18 already :O! I had a look at myself and only found 1, which was from letting Lyca out for a wee the night before. It's normally me that get eaten alive, so I found this quite amusing :P.

When I went to let Lyca out for a wee before going to bed I chose to go round the front because there didn't seem to be as many midgies round there. Sure enough it was much better than round the back and I stood waiting for Lyca to finish sniffing around and get on with the job in hand. I then noticed loads of white winged moths, which seemed to be flying around weirdly about an inch above the grass. I was baffled as to what they were, as I didn't know of any totally white winged moths that looked like this at all, so I knocked on the window and told Wendy. She went off and grabbed a pot from the utility room and passed it out to me. I caught one and brought it into the living room where Wendy had the book ready. I reckoned they looked a bit like Ruby Tigers but with white wings but she wasn't convinced. There were (as expected) no moths in the book bearing any resemblance to them, so we had to presume that their wings hadn't developed properly yet and that had just emerged. It was very interesting to see though and I got a shot of the moth before letting it go. By the time I'd got a shot and we were suitably baffled it was 11pm and we were more than ready for bed.



Weird Moth

It wasn't until we were back at home and Wendy had the time to look into it that we found out what they were and her findings took us by total surprise. They were male **Ghost Moths** (females are a completely different colour!) doing their characteristic display or 'lekking' flight, which they do at dusk. There can be up to several dozen of them all swaying to and fro around one spot as if they're attached to a pendulum, which was what we'd seen the Gold Swifts doing the night before. They release a goat-like scent which hopefully attracts a female.....how cool is that?

Tuesday 21st June

It was sunny when we got up at 7.10am but we could already see the grey clouds rolling in towards us. Annoyingly it hadn't rained overnight again, so the Moth trap could've gone out after all. Wendy was in the kitchen making sarnies while I ate my breakfast at the table and casually said, "All we need is a Red Squirrel in the garden now and we've got the lot." I laughed and thought nothing more of it until 2 minutes later when something caught my eye and I called out, "Wendy, Wendy, Red Squirrel!" Unbelievably there was one climbing up a tree in the woods behind the house, so it wasn't officially in the garden but was close enough for both of us. It was a really scruffy looking individual and I sat poised with my camera willing it to come closer, so I could get a shot. It seemed to be coming closer and even did a pretty impressive jump between 2 trees at one point. I managed to get a shot of it through the window, which is only what I'd describe as a record shot. Still, we'd now had Crestie and Red Squirrel in the garden having not expected either :).



Red Squirrel

We headed out at 9.30am and because the weather was dodgy I decided to go straight to Forest Lodge. We'd only be looking for birds there, so it didn't matter if the sun didn't show its face. There wasn't much point doing our usual Caper walk, so I found a completely new one to mix things up a bit.

When we arrived it was 10.10am and grey and windy outside, so enthusiasm levels were pretty low. Lyca was raring to go of course and didn't waste any time in deciding to do a poo! There's no poo bins anywhere in Scotland, so I put the bag in an obvious place next to the car to pick up when we left. We set off down the path and at the bottom we heard a call we recognized. We looked up and found a Tree Pipit singing from the top of a power line. Next we turned right and headed over the bridge and into the woods, noticing the sign saying, "supported by the EU"



Not any more it isn't!

It was pretty quiet in there but you never know what you're going to find, so we weren't instantly dismissive. After we'd been walking for ages we started to wonder why we were bothering, although it was a great walk for Lyca if nothing else. We found ourselves slightly stuck when we hit a river, which was too wide to jump. We followed it up a bit to see if it narrowed anywhere but it didn't. There was however a narrow fallen tree across it, which Wendy seemed think we could walk across.



Hmmmmmm?

I didn't fancy my chances much as soon as I put my foot on it especially carrying my heavy camera gear. Wendy stood on it and I don't know when or where she studied circus skills but she managed to tightrope walk it over to the other side :O! There was no way I could do it so I had to wander down stream to find a narrower section. It looked jumpable so I went for it. In a perfectly controlled leap I launched myself into the air and all of a sudden I had a flashback to the incident at Haweswater where I did the same maneuver but fell short and just managed to scramble up the bank without getting my camera soaked, just my legs! My heart was in my mouth for a split second but fortunately I landed on my feet on the other side. Even if it hadn't been with the grace of a gazelle I'd made it without injury.....Phew! I had hold of Lyca's lead and she just paddled across probably wondering what all the fuss was about :P.

Excitement over we carried on up a hill through the woods. Wendy heard a Crestie, so we stopped and found 2 busy feeding high up in the branches of a tree, so the views we had were bad. I don't know how but we seemed to have gone the wrong way somewhere along the line and had found ourselves doing a bit of off-roading and squelching through a boggy moorland area outside the woods.



Lost again

Lyca wasn't bothered but all Wendy could think about was her getting ticks from the deep heather and both of us tucked our trousers into our socks as a

precaution. Not a good look but we weren't dressing for a fashion show :P. We managed to get back on track though and we went through a gate back into the woods.



What are you doing?

Wendy had no faith that I knew where we were going and was certain that we were lost again. I checked the map on my phone and assured her that I definitely wasn't lost but she wasn't convinced. At last we seemed to be heading downwards and came out at the bottom of the woods where 2 x Tornados went over. We then turned a corner only to find a ford up ahead but we imagined there'd be some steppingstones so we could cross it. When we got closer it became apparent that there wasn't anything vaguely as useful, so we stood staring at the water.



Now what?

It didn't narrow off anywhere further up either so our only option was to paddle it. I was expecting Wendy to blow a gasket at the idea especially as we knew fine well how cold it was going to be but she was well up for it! I couldn't believe what I was hearing but she was deadly serious :O! She then proceeded to

remove her shoes and socks, roll up her trousers and said, "I'll go 1st to check out how slippery the stones are, then I can let you know." She was obviously thinking that I was going to go flying and drop my camera in it or something! I took off my shoes and socks and watched Wendy put her foot in, which was instantly followed by a shriek of utter pain, so I grabbed my camera and took a photo :P.



Bahahaha!

When she started to cautiously wade out towards the other side her sound effects were so funny that I quickly changed to video! She was laughing and shrieking in pain at the same time, as the water was soooooo cold and it penetrated straight through to the bones in her feet. When she got to the other side she said it wasn't that slippery then threw herself onto the ground, because her feet were aching so badly and rolled around laughing.....Hahahaha! While I'd been taking the video I'd tested the water too and believe me it was absolutely freezing! She videoed me as I crossed which was an equally noisy affair. Lyca was just paddling around the whole time probably wondering what on earth was up with us. I too was relieved when I got to the other and also sat down to help my feet recover. There were loads of midgies around the water, so we couldn't afford to hang about and had to put our socks and shoes back on before our feet had dried. Wendy commented that her feet felt all tingly and refreshed, like she'd just been to a foot spa and that she'd have to do it more often. I had to laugh because she's not a fan of the cold, so I strongly suspect she won't be doing it again in a hurry :P. She had a point though and we'd been walking for a while, so our feet had become quite hot in our boots, so the cold water had definitely given them a new lease of life.

Hoping that we wouldn't come across any more challenges we continued on our walk hearing a Redstart. It was nice to have finally learned our lesson and mastered the Redstart call after not realizing how many we must've heard during all our past trips away. We found ourselves on a more open footpath and could see a bit of blue sky heading our way. The sun then came out and we started to see loads of Bordered white Moths followed by a **Large-red Damselfly**! This meant we really needed to get to the pools I'd pinpointed for Dragonflies at Boat of Garten as soon as possible but we were miles away from them, so we had to up our pace, get our skates on and get back to the car as soon

as possible. This was proving quite difficult, as we'd dressed for the cold and we were soon absolutely boiling and having to remove our coats and hats to try to cool down. We didn't have time to stop though if we stood any chance of seeing any of the things I'd hoped to during the week.....Uh oh! The bridge at the bottom of the path to the car was a welcome sight and the Tree Pipit was still singing its heart out in the same spot as we'd heard it when we'd arrived. We hurried back, sweating buckets and finally got to the car at 12.46pm where I quickly got Lyca into her harness and screeched out of the car park.

It was a race against time to get to Loch Garten and we could already see black clouds rolling in towards us (this would become a theme for the week!). The track out of Forest Lodge is very rough and slow going, so we felt like we were getting nowhere fast! I finally got out onto the main road and could start making some progress but all of a sudden I had a horrible thought. I'd just remembered that we'd forgotten to pick up the poo bag I'd put by the car.....Ooops! This meant that we'd have to go back to get it but 1st we had to try our luck at the pools before the sun went in again!

When we arrived at the layby across the road from the Loch Garten pool it was 1.05pm and we were hungry. There was a car parked in front of us with a woman in the passenger seat, so the driver must've been down at the pool. We were pondering about having lunch 1st but a bloke appeared, went to the car nodding his head and reached inside to get his tripod we guessed he'd been successful. We were after White-faced Darter and Northern Emerald Dragonflies, so we ditched having lunch off and made our way down the boardwalk to where he'd resumed his position.



Loch Garten pool

These would be lifers for us, so Wendy spoke to him 1st hoping for something good and said, "Judging by your body language you've got something?" Our hearts sank when he said that there were just some Damselflies but we had a scan anyway. There was nothing flying but Wendy was 1st to spot one resting on some grass and then she found another behind it, which were both **Northern Damselflies**.



Northern Damselfly

It was looking highly unlikely that we were going to see what we'd gone there for, as the sun had gone in again. Wendy quickly got bored and took Lyca back to the car, so she could have lunch while I stayed put. I chatted to the bloke for a while and we found more Northern, **Common Blue** and **Blue-tailed Damselflies** and got a bit excited when some Dragonflies started to emerge. Frustratingly these all turned out to be just **Four-spotted Chasers**, so I gave up in the end and went to get my lunch too. After I'd finished we went back over the road to give it one last shot adding **Azure Damselfly** to our list. We'd read up a bit about the behavior of the 2 Dragonflies we were after, so when Wendy found a couple right at the back of the pool which zoomed at 100mph up into the tops of the trees we wondered if they were them. We had no chance of getting a view of them, they were just too quick, so we gave up and had to leave empty handed. Hopefully that wasn't the last we'd seen of the sun for the week! Looking back I was annoyed with myself for having ignored the Northern Damselflies as much as I did. I only have 1 photo of them from a few years ago and it was only the 2nd time we'd ever seen them! I was just too focused on trying to find the others and had been blinded by the prospect of a lifer Dohhh.

Back at the car it was 2.25pm and after Wendy had paid the shop at Boat of Garten a visit I parked up nearby in the car park of Boat of Garten Woods. There was a pool in there, which we'd found during our March trip, so we took a wander over to it but there was nothing there in the overcast conditions.

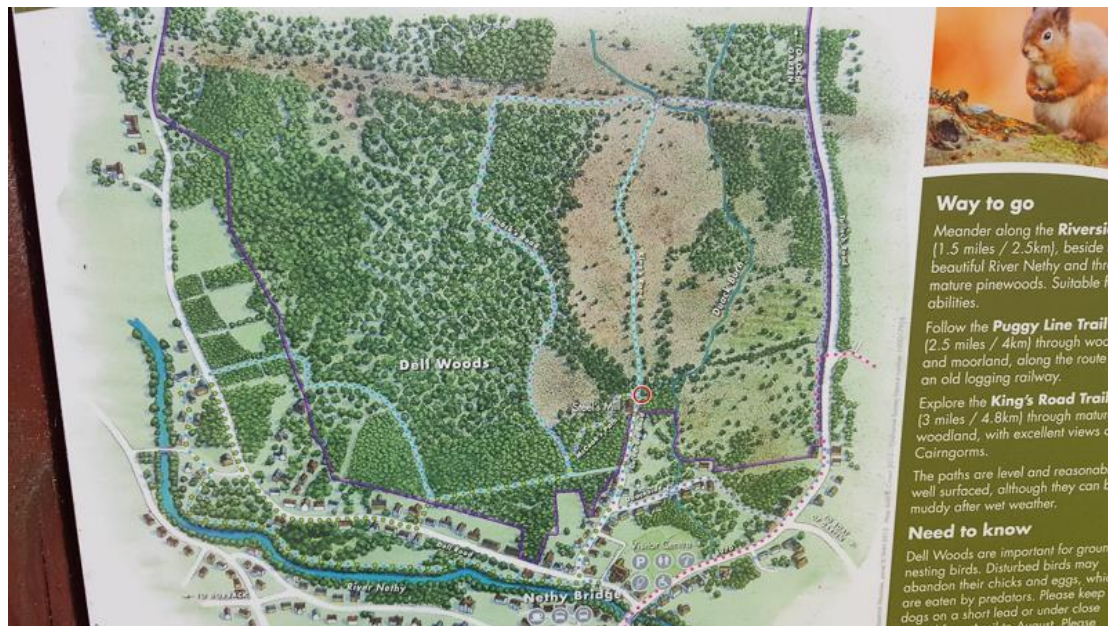
It was 3pm by the time we got back and before we completely forgot about it I drove back to Forest Lodge to retrieve the poo bag we'd accidentally left there earlier. Driving down the bumpy track just for a bag of poo was anything but fun and just to make matters worse we had to do all again in reverse.....Grrrrr! Half way down though we spotted a Crossbill at the top of the tree. Thinking I hadn't taken many photos, I jumped out and tried for a shot although it was against a horrible sky.



Crossbill

Lyca looked anything but pleased and was puffing and panting in the back seat like a Steam Train. She doesn't seem to like being in the car unless we're going quite fast and on relatively smooth roads.....fussy madam! When I pulled into the car park I commented to Wendy, "I hope nobody's driven over it and burst the bag!" so I was ½ expecting it when Wendy said, "Uh oh!" Sure enough the bag was totally flattened and had burst, so Wendy suggested getting another bag to pick it up with :/. What a palaver! Having wasted enough time already I slowly drove back down the horrible bumpy road with all of us thoroughly fed up!

My car was reading 17.5c when I parked up at Dell Woods at 3.36pm, so it was warm enough but we just needed some sun to peak through. This time we were going to do a new walk as it said in a leaflet there were Golden-ringed Dragonflies in the area! The route we took was along the purple trail that followed the old Puggy Railway line that used to service the logging area.



Map

There were Bordered white Moths everywhere again, which seemed to be the most prolific Moth in Scotland! We heard a Crestie calling but couldn't see it, as from what we'd gathered they were all too busy feeding at the tops of the trees to be viewable. When we got to the houses we saw a Red Squirrel and realized that we'd seen more of them in just the few days we'd been there than we had in years! We didn't see much else but we did find the Golden-ringed Dragonfly area but the sun wasn't out, so we didn't stand a chance :(Very depressing!



Right place, wrong time!

It was 4.50pm when we got back to the car and although Wendy was keen to get home the sun had come out again....Arrghhhhh! Not wanting to miss an opportunity I took us back to Boat of Garten Woods again and parked up in the layby. We wandered up to the pools but there was no sign of life at all. There was nothing flying around and we couldn't even find anything resting in the grassy edges this time.....Urrghhhhh! This was disappointing to say the least and I wondered if we'd ever get the right conditions to get lucky with the Scottish specialities we'd gone all that way for. As I drove home we passed a bloke in a field bending down with a camera pointing at the ground. The only thing I could

think was that he was getting shots of some kind of rare plant. Wendy was instantly curious and wanted to know what but I said we'd go back next time we passed and made a note of it in my satnav. We also saw couple of places that looked nice to go to for tea. All we had to do was find out if they dog friendly or not, so Wendy made a note of them to check later.

We were back at HQ at 5.43pm feeling tired and my feet were sore, so I had a look at my Fitbit to see how many steps we'd done. I thought 24,000 was quite good considering and I think Lyca did too, as she slept all night after she'd had her tea. After we'd had tea Wendy went off for a long soak in the bath and used some of the 'Radox Muscle Soak' that'd been left behind by some previous guests. Just after she got in she had the awful thought that it was actually spiked with some kind of body dissolving acid.....Hahahahaha! Only Wendy could have a thought like that but after a while when she realized that all her bits were still intact she finally relaxed :P. There was rain forecast over night again and whether we believed it or not, given the previous nights, it wasn't worth the risk and we still couldn't put the moth trap out. After our long and adventurous day of crossing streams and fords we couldn't stay up any longer and went to bed at 10.10pm.

Wednesday 22nd June

It was 6.50am when we surfaced and it was sunny but windy outside. Yet again it hadn't rained over night so we were again very annoyed about not having been able to get the trap out. As it was sunny our 1st plan was to get out as early as possible before it clouded over to check the layby up the road. This was the place for Small Blue and Dingy Skipper Butterflies (both lifers) and having failed last time we really hoped for better luck this time around. When Wendy had made the sarnies, we'd both caked ourselves in Smidge and given Lyca a spritz of Skin so Soft we were ready to go by 8.59am. As we got into the car we noticed the dark clouds heading our way, so I wasted no time in leaving.

At 9.11am I pulled into the layby and we got out of the car for a look around. We quickly found the Horseshoe Vetch, which is the Small Blue's food plant but there was no sign of any Butterflies.....Typical! There were midgies everywhere though, so we quickly went back to the car. I then thought it'd be a good idea to drive up the road and suss the area out to see if we spot any areas, which looked better. There wasn't of course, so we ended up back at the layby to wait and see if we could find anything flying. We sat for ages without seeing a single movement, apart from the flies and midgies that were surrounding the car like something out a zombie movie! We were just thinking about giving up when Wendy squeaked and pointed to the left.....What the...? She'd seen a brown coloured Butterfly with some whitish markings on its wings whizz past the car and over the road :O! It'd all happened so quickly that she didn't even have time to raise her bins and it'd had now vanished.....Boooooo! We waited for a while longer and even got out of the car to check the hedge to see if we could flush it out from the spot Wendy saw it go down. Obviously we had no such luck and we never clapped eyes on it again. By then I was feeling severely grumpy, as I may as well have thrown the entire day's plans out of the window :(Every single patch of blue sky that appeared to be heading our way never seemed to materialize. We were spending more time looking at the sky and trying to predict cloud movements than looking for wildlife on this holiday!!! With that

depressing thought we gave up at 10.05am and kissed goodbye to the only lead to a possible Dingy Skipper we'd ever had :{.

Things were going from bad to worse, so it seemed an appropriate time for Wendy to nip to Tesco in Aviemore. I was craving some square sausage and we'd been unable to find it elsewhere. While she was in there it absolutely chucked it down and all I could think was that midgies love to come out if it's sunny after rain.....Arrghhhhhh! My mood wasn't improving either and I was annoyed at the stupidly tight spaces in the car park. My car has taken a bit of a battering recently from people bashing the paintwork with their doors, so I sat watching the bloke who'd just parked next to me in a van with trepidation. Sure enough, when he opened his door he hit my car with it because he was so close.....Grrrrrrrrr! I chose not to retaliate. Wendy had been gone for ages and I started to wonder if she'd been arrested or something but she finally emerged complete with square sausage and we set off not really knowing what to do next.

As we drove towards Loch Insh we noticed that one of the Opreys was flying around, so I parked up. I grabbed my camera and we all headed off down the footpath to the beach.



Loch Insh

One of the birds was still sitting on top of a tree but the other, which had been flying, had totally cleared off. After hoping for some action I had to settle on getting pics of the bird in the tree, which was still just that bit too far away for my liking. Wendy even wanted to join in, so using my shoulder as a tripod she fired off some shots too.



Osprey

After a while the sky grew darker and then the rain started, so we gave up.

A Willow Warbler appeared in the bushes in front of us and it was so close I thought I'd grab a quick pic. I got it in my viewfinder and followed it through the branches hoping for it to come into the clear. I'd just about given up on the shot when I saw what appeared to be another head, so I focus in on it. It turned out to be a baby but there wasn't just one, there was a line of 5 fluffy yellow Willow Warblers all huddled together in the shelter of the bush waiting to be fed!! I got Wendy onto them and she was blown away by their cuteness.



Awwwwww

We hadn't expected that but we were expecting the rain to get worse, which it did! We left the birds to it and made a hasty retreat back to the car just in time for a downpour.



Good timing!

My enthusiasm levels had dropped off a cliff by then due to the fact that this was the day I'd planned everything around finding Dragonflies, Damselflies and Butterflies. It'd been the day with the least rain and most hours of sun forecasted but it was looking as though they couldn't have been more wrong if they'd tried! More depressingly it looked as though we weren't going to get a good day for the rest of week either, so feeling totally defeated we headed for home.

Back at HQ it was 12.04pm and practically lunchtime, so we sat down at the kitchen table and watched the rain through the window. After lunch and Wendy had finished her 3rd cup of tea she felt so unmotivated that she could've easily gone to sleep, so I decided that we were going out regardless of the weather. Wendy wasn't so keen especially when I showed her the thin band of rain coming in that was going to sit over everywhere we wanted to be for the rest of the day.....Urrghghhh!

It was 1.19pm when we left and driving towards the Rothiemurchus Visitor Centre Wendy suggested going in for a look for some pressies. We'd never been there before, so although it wasn't quite what I'd had in mind it was better than nothing. We left Lyca in the car and wandered inside where Wendy picked up various expensive deli items. After a while she'd run out of hands, so started piling them onto me until she was happy enough and went to pay....Phew! I'd come away with nothing whereas she'd finished her pressie shopping, so had achieved something at least. After that we checked Dulnain Bridge for Dipper but there was no sign. We still needed to take the very confused and bored looking Lyca for a walk, so my next plan was to do a different walk at Anagach Woods.

When I parked up at 2.24pm it was raining heavily and it felt as though we just couldn't escape it. We walked over the road instead of going on our usual route and into the other side of the woods.



Anagach Woods

I knew that this walk was only a short one, so if the heavens opened we could get back to the car more quickly. I had also spotted a stream on the map so if the sun did poke out (fat chance) then there might be a GRD about. As usual there were Bordered white Moths flying around but very little else but Lyca needed a walk. She was enjoying herself, so at least one of us was! We got to the end of the woodland path and found ourselves facing a field with a huge pile of manure in it.....



Manure field

We had no choice but to go through it, again tucking our trousers into our socks. I tried to get a photo of a Deer grazing in the field but as soon as it clapped eyes on us it was off like a rocket over the fence.



Roe Deer

Lyca obviously spotted it and was pulling so hard on her lead I thought my shoulder was going to come out of its socket! At the end of the field was a gate back into the woods, so at least we were going the right way again but as I went to close it the heavy spring flew back and trapped my finger.....Owwww! It was really painful and a bruise instantly appeared just to make my mood even worse than it already was :(Wendy wasn't concerned that I'd nearly crushed my finger completely and may have ended our holiday right there!! The rest of the walk was non eventful and we were back at the car at 3.37pm totally fed up.

I had no baps to have with my square sausage, so I drove to Grantown-on-Spey and Wendy ran over to the Bakery. I sat for ages waiting for her and wondered what was taking her so long, so when I saw her heading back from the other side of the road I was surprised. The Bakery had run out, so she'd had to go on a hunt and had eventually found some in the Co-op. She'd also bought a cheese twist, so after we'd eaten that we headed off with me moaning about how the day had been a complete write off. On the way home we stopped at the field we'd seen the bloke taking photos in and he was there again. I parked up and we left Lyca in the car to go for a look. We looked over the fence and could see that the field was caked in a load of Orchids we'd never seen before.



Orchid field

The bloke, who was holding a clicker and obviously doing some kind of count, came over to us and we got chatting. Apparently it was the best field in Britain for Lesser Butterfly Orchid and he showed us which ones they were. He also pointed out Heath fragrant and Small White, which were the ones of interest as well as telling us about Lesser Twayblade, which were in the woods behind the field. There were Heath spotted too, but we get them at home and are common, so not as interesting. I grabbed some photos of them just for the record too.



Lesser Butterfly Orchid



Heath fragrant Orchid

The bloke had been in Yorkshire, where he was from, when the lovely weather had been up in Scotland and was also annoyed that he'd missed it. We had a grumble about our predicament with not having the right conditions to see the insects we wanted. He said he'd had a Northern brown Argus earlier though, which made us groan, as that would be a lifer for us! We could hear a Yellowhammer singing in the background while we were talking to him too but he needed to get on with his survey, so we left him to it. What a really nice and friendly bloke though, we learnt a lot from him in a short space of time.

Back at HQ it was only 4.52pm and the earliest we'd called it a day all week but Wendy gave Lyca her dinner and then set about doing ours. Mine was easy and having grown tired of the same thing every night she'd got some mushrooms and tomatoes to rustle up a veggie all day breakfast with beans and micro chips, for herself. My square sausage baps and micro chips didn't disappoint as always but as usual Wendy was left disgusted as to how much fat is left in the pan! After tea we both had baths and feeling decidedly itchy we did a new midgie count and found that Wendy was on 24 but I still only had 9.....Hahaha :P. The rain had finally cleared by late evening and the forecast was for it to stay dry for the night. This meant that finally I could get the moth trap out, which wasn't ideal given we had an early start planned for tomorrow but I seized the opportunity because it would be the only chance we had. Although we'd had a pretty inactive day we were tired nevertheless and packed up for the night at around 11pm. Tomorrow was going to be a very long day and we needed all the energy we could get.

Thursday 23rd June

We were woken up at 6.30am by my alarm and I stumbled out of bed to go and see what we'd caught. The 1st thing I noticed was 1000's of midgies on the inside of the kitchen window, which had come in through the small gap created by the cable of the moth trap leading out of the window....Nooooooooooo! I grabbed a book from the shelf and set about squashing as many as possible because we'd already been bitten enough without inviting all of them inside for an 'Eat as much as like buffet!' There was a type of Pug and Carpet on the kitchen wall that had also come in through the gap. Wendy was still in bed wondering what the banging noise was, so got up to investigate. When she saw the carnage on the windowsill she was gobsmacked and I went outside to get her to pass the cable to me, so we could shut the window. After that she finished as many of the remaining bloodsuckers off as she could and then gave everything a good wipe down. She was sure there'd be 100's more flying around in the kitchen but they'd have to wait. I then started to empty the trap outside and had to let some of the less interesting ones go or else I'd have run out of pots. We had a quality collection to put in the fridge for later, as we had no time to sit around trying to ID Moths, as we had to get going as early as possible.

Today was the day I'd pinned all my hopes of bagging a Munro on, as it was the least windy and most settled. We'd been up Cairngorm in the past and I'd worked out that the top of Ben Macdui wasn't much further on and more than doable. At 4,295ft Ben Macdui is the 2nd highest mountain in Britain, after Ben Nevis at 4,413ft. Going up there had been something I'd wanted to do for years. We had our usual cereal for breakfast plus Wendy had a piece of toast and I had a yogurt for extra fuel and I crossed my fingers that my nail-less toe would survive the day without any ill effects.

By 8.15am we were ready to go and set off into the unknown. It was a lovely sunny day without even a breath of wind, which were of course the perfect conditions we'd been hoping for all week. This was really annoying because if the Dragonflies and Butterflies we wanted to find were going to be out then today was the day. Why didn't we change our plans and go for them today after our disastrous day yesterday? Because I was absolutely hell bent on going up Ben Macdui before my 40th Birthday, that's why :P. I knew that this was going to be the last day of good weather and we couldn't attempt the walk if there even the slightest risk of rain as up on the plateau is a very dangerous place in

anything but good weather, so it was now or never. Driving past the river at Kincaig Wendy spotted a female Goosander swimming around with her chicks and she felt slightly apprehensive about the day ahead. She wasn't feeling particularly energetic but that was probably the depression of the past week setting in and all she needed was a good kick up the arse to get her back on form :P. We started to drive up to Cairngorm and were heading to the Black Grouse watch point 'Coire na Ciste' when a Blackbird flew over the road. I'd read an article by a bloke who'd seen Ring Ouzels by the old ski lift at Coire na Ciste and we were keen to have a look.



Coire Na Ciste

Seeing an actual Blackbird up there would be unusual and I stopped the car and we got out to see if we could find where the bird had gone. There was no sign of it but we could clearly hear the calls of a **Ring Ouzel** echoing around us :). We carried on up to Coire na Ciste as well and had a good scan but saw nothing apart from some people who were camping just to the left of the car park....Nutters!



Happy campers

By then it was 17.5c and the view was amazing, so I carried on driving towards the car park at the Cairngorm Visitor Centre. The upper car park was the quietest we'd ever seen it and as I drove into the lower car park I was the only car there. We flushed another Black thrush as I drove in and it quickly flew across the car park and disappeared behind a piece of plastic pipe lying at the side. This had to be another R.O but even though I was standing right next to the pipe I couldn't see it for dust. Eventually I had to bend right over and I could see a dark shadow hiding far into the pipe! Wendy finally got an angle on it on the side nearest to her and we could see that it was actually a juvenile R.O :O! We could hear the parent calling nearly but couldn't find it for the life of us but they do have a knack of being able to throw their voices. Coupled with finally seeing the sun and having nice weather this was a brilliant start to the day. I got Lyca on her lead and grabbed the rucksack, which had a small bottle of water and biscuit each in it. I put that on my back and my big camera set up over my shoulder and at 9.03am we all set off.



Hurry up!

We hadn't even made it out of the lower car park when Wendy took a decking.....Doh! She slipped on the gravel at the side of the steps, so things weren't going very well before we'd even set off. Luckily she managed to stop laughing and dusted herself down and we carried on wondering what was going to go wrong next. She popped into the toilets for a final wee before we started our walk and found a girl brushing her teeth in there. She must've been camping somewhere too! After I'd made a quick visit to the men's we ambled our way towards the Alpine Garden, where Ring Ouzels breed and are often seen but weirdly we'd never looked there.



Alpine Garden

Unfortunately we must've been just that little bit too late in the day as all the books say to get there 1st thing before they're disturbed by people and move off. The chances were that it would've been the family we'd seen down in the lower car park. Wendy went into the camera obscura and came out looking all disorientated, so I went in next with her and Lyca behind me. It was a strange feeling being in the pitch black with a projection of the view on the table and I didn't like it much, so came out quickly feeling decidedly weird.



Camera obscura

We finally bit the bullet and started our walk at 9.27am and before long we had to take our coats off, as it was so warm. The 1st steep section, before getting your 2nd wind, is always a killer and today was no exception. We kept stopping at intervals to have a rest, as did everyone else ahead of us.



Urrghhh

There was a couple with a dog higher up and it was running backwards and forwards like a complete lunatic. As we got closer we reckoned it was another Cockerpoo, which would explain it's mental behaviour, which we have to say was worse than Lyca has ever been :). As we approached them Wendy asked if it was a Cockerpoo and they confirmed our suspicions. We exchanged notes about the breed and they said that theirs was un-tireable and had just come back after chasing a Red Grouse for about a mile :O! Considering there's a big sign at the start of walk telling dog owners to keep their dogs on leads due to breeding birds we thought this was pretty irresponsible of them to say the least. If everyone ignored the signs and did what they wanted surely it wouldn't be long before they banned dogs altogetherGrrrrrr! There's always got to be someone who spoils things for others though! By then Wendy was so hot she'd already drunk a fair bit of one of the bottles of water and was looking at it wondering if the rest would be enough to last us :/. It was too late to do anything about it now though and she'd just have to take it easy.

We stopped about ½ way up to the top of the first steep section and sat down to admire the view for a few minutes.



Having a break

A couple in their 60's with a couple of Springer Spaniels (on leads) that were permanently staring at Lyca, who'd been behind us, were slowly approaching. Lyca decided that she didn't like their dogs and started barking like mad at them, which the bloke didn't look too impressed with. The woman was dragging behind and stuck her tongue out to the side in a tired gesture as she walked past, so Wendy out of interest asked her, "How far up are you going? The woman shrugged her shoulders and looked confused, as she hadn't understood a word Wendy had said. They sounded Scandinavian or something but with Lyca taking a dislike to their dogs we could do with losing them and quickly. We carried on and overtook them when they stopped for a rest, so there was more barking and stress:/. Further up Wendy stopped, pointed to the rocks on her right and got me onto a very cute fluffy **Mountain Hare Leveret** :). It was so well camouflaged that I don't know how she'd spotted it but I fired off a few shots which gave the other couple time to catch up with us and go past again.....Urrghhhh! It was turning into a game of cat and mouse!



Mountain Hare

Finally we reached the nice flat section and breathed a sigh of relief. At least some of the walk wasn't uphill for a change. We'd been on that section before but not for long, so we knew nothing about the terrain from then on.



What a view!

While we walked along the path something caught the corner of Wendy's eye and she pointed out a very dark Moth, feeding on some flowers. She had a pretty good idea of what it was especially when she saw it crawling 'spider-like' along the ground. I wasn't as sure as there's a few that are similar and tried my hardest to get some shots of it, so we could check. It never stayed still for long and shooting into the sun made it near impossible, which was a shame as I doubt we'll ever see one ever again. Wendy got her phone out and checked the Moth app and sure enough we'd just seen our 1st **Black Mountain Moth** :O. Woo Hoo! We'd only been reading about the montane insect specialties a couple of days ago too which had really helped.



Black Mountain Moth

The 2 Spaniels were miles ahead of us by then but we could still see them further up the track. All of a sudden one of them, who was luckily still on it's lead, lurched itself into the long grass and started barking frantically while the poor bloke had to try and rein it in. A large white winged bird came flapping out of the

grass and flew clumsily over the path and we looked on with open jaws. It was definitely a **Ptarmigan** but we were worried that it might have chicks and that the dog was going to get one....Uh oh! Luckily the bloke eventually gained a bit of control back of his dog and they carried on before any damage was done.....Phew! We hate to imagine what would've happened if that dog had been off the lead, which is why we NEVER let Lyca off hers. By the time we got to the spot the Ptarmigan was obviously agitated and running around like a headless chicken making alarm calls. Lyca spotted it of course and went straight up onto her back legs and started to dance at it....Urrghhhh! I grabbed a quick shot of it but it was stressed enough, so we hurried off to leave it to resume some kind of peace.



Ptarmigan

At least we'd managed to find one of the birds we'd set off hoping to see though. We'd started to climb upwards again and when we turned a corner the enormity of what we were undertaking was clear to see.....Aarrghhhhhh! We could see people the size of a grain of sand on the top of Ben Macdui miles away on the horizon. Wendy's face hit the floor and we looked at each other in disbelief :O.



The summit (in the far distance)!

I really thought she was going to throw a Karl Pilkington but unbelievably, she didn't and we carried on. At this point I'd expected to see the top just round the corner NOT ***** miles away but we'd gone that far and we certainly weren't going to give up now. The next section was all down hill on a path, which led to an area known as the plateau, which is a flat grassy area with some pools dotted around that looked really good for breeding waders.



The plateau

After having a quick look and seeing nothing we came to the conclusion that they obviously weren't, which was disappointing seeing as one of the birds we'd wanted to see was Dotterel. Having enjoyed being on the flat again we'd started to climb upwards in what could only be described as a boulder field! It was hard going walking on some of the sharper rocks not to mention the ones that moved!



Boulder field

Even Lyca slipped and her leg disappeared down one of the cracks. Due to the terrain there was obviously no path but there were some markers built of stones, which were very useful to follow and keep us going in the right direction. They'd be pretty useless if the low cloud came in though and we could easily see how you could get very lost up there! We then heard a very odd call briefly, which echoed all around us but the bird was doing a good job of voice throwing and we couldn't find it. Wendy's initial thought was that it sounded a bit like a Skylark but knew it couldn't be at that altitude. We had a hunch as to what it was but wanted to see it before we called it, so we carried on. It started to call more and more frequently and I was up ahead aiming for the sound. After what seemed like ages I eventually found the little **** that was calling and confirmed that it was a stunning Summer Male **Snow Bunting**. I got a rubbish record shot of it but I just hoped we would get a better chance further up as they were supposed to be at the top of Ben Macdui.

This was the 2nd of the birds we'd gone all that way for though, so we were pretty chuffed :). We didn't have all day and still had quite a way to go and we knew we'd see more, further up anyway. After we'd cleared the boulder field we stopped to look at what lay ahead. When we saw what we had in store for us next we both said some choice expletives but it looked as though we were nearly at the top. All we had to do was climb up a really steep section of loose gravel and rocks, which looked pretty treacherous and we'd have cracked it. We were feeling a bit on the deflated side looking at it but then a woman probably in her 70's came over the top and started to walk down towards us. She was using poles, which helped her out big time when she slipped but we reckoned that if she could do it then so could we. With our new lease of enthusiasm we started to slowly make our way up.



Steep!

Now I'm not a fan of walking on unstable ground at the best of times but when I'm carrying a rucksack, my camera and holding Lyca's lead it just makes matters worse. If I took a decking then it'd be bad! Although it wasn't easy we zigzagged our way up the path with the thought of coming out at the top keeping us going :). When our heads poked over the top we saw that our goalpost had shifted and we weren't at the top at all.....Aarrghhhh! After getting our breath back we continued across what now resembled a moonscape with no ground cover at all, which fortunately was relatively flat for a while before the final climb to the top.



Lunar landing

There was still plant life up there though and Wendy found some pretty little pink flowers, which looked like something you'd buy from the Alpine section of a Garden Centre. From what she could gather she reckoned it was possibly Purple Saxifrage but after consulting Andy she found out it was actually Moss Campion.



Moss Campion

It was so quiet up there that you could've heard a pin drop and the echoing calls of the Snow Buntings sounded quite eerie in such strange surroundings. We knew we'd broken the back of the walk though and were still feeling quite good considering. While we walked towards the last steep section below the summit something caught Wendy's eye and she'd found another Ptarmigan. This one was much further up than the 1st we'd seen and much more like where we'd have expected to see one. There was a couple heading down towards us and I couldn't resist asking them how much further we had to go. Having been tricked by perspective before we didn't want to get our hopes up too high but we were pleasantly surprised when he said, "Oh, probably about 10 minutes." Eyeing up my camera lens he then said, "There's loads of Snow Buntings flying around up there, really close, tons of them!" Yes! With a final burst of energy we completed the last steep and rocky climb to the top and came out on a large, flat area of rocky ground.....Phew!

At 12.40pm we wandered over to the trig point, which marks the summit and Wendy put her hands on top of it just for good measure :). There was a couple up there already, sitting in a stone shelter on foldaway chairs eating their lunch. They must've been in their late 60's and had an entire mountain equipment store with them. The woman kept getting up and going after a Snow Bunting that was flying around, which was slightly annoying. Having expected a cracking 360degree view of all the surrounding mountains in reality we were quite disappointed by what we could actually see. The summit was so flat and wide that it blocked the majority of the view.....Boooooooooo :(.



Leave the Snow Bunts alone!

I set the camera up to take a photo of us all at the top, which took ages. Wendy who'd watched another guy give his camera to the older couple to take a photo for him suggested we did the same, as it'd be quicker. There was no way I was going to pose for a photo in front of a random stranger, so I ignored her :P. If the photo was awful then it was tough, I couldn't be bothered doing it again. I ran over to join Wendy and Lyca and we grinned inanely at the camera on the ground and waited for it to take the shot. By the time it did I think we'd got bored and were wondering why it hadn't gone off because we looked anything but happy.....Doh!



:O!

After that I went over and rested my hands on top of the stone to finally get my breath back. Wendy all of a sudden said, "Ewwwww you've just put your hand in Snow Bunting poo!" I looked down and sure enough I had poo on my finger, which was totally typical of my luck. By then we were pretty hungry and sat down to eat the biscuit we'd brought with us. Watching the 3 other people who were all sitting over by the shelter enjoying their proper food and drinks made us slightly envious. We realized that we'd totally underestimated how long the

walk was going to take us and had thought we'd be back at the car by lunchtime.....Oooops! As I ate my biscuit Wendy very kindly pointed out that I hadn't washed my hand, so was now eating Snow Bunting poo.....Grrrrrrr! Oh well, I don't suppose there's many other people who can lay claim to that! It was so barren up there but there was still quite a lot of Craneflies around, so obviously enough food for the birds to feed on. More than could be said about us, we were starving and I was a bit thirsty, as I'd only had one sip of Wendy's water so far! There were about 5 Snow Buntings calling and flying around at the summit, which was a far cry from the bloke's description of them being everywhere! When one came quite close I thought I'd better make the most of it and try and get some shots. As soon as I stepped towards it, it flew off.... Urrggghhhh! Eventually I got some shots of one but it was a bit further away than I'd hoped.



Snow Bunting

I then went on to get some video, after all it's not every day you get to film a summer plumage Snow Bunting on its breeding grounds :). Wendy was by then shivering with the cold and Lyca had started to whinge and although I was quite happy videoing Snow Bunts I took the hint and we set off at 1pm :(.

We felt good coming down the 1st bit but when we got to the really steep slippery section we started to really feel it on our knees. We took it slowly and didn't envy the group of walkers who'd just started to climb up it. At least we'd already done the hard part.....Hahahahaha :P. Next up was the boulder field in reverse, which was even trickier going down than it had been going up. Lyca who'd obviously been pacing herself earlier and had trotted along next to me quite nicely was now starting to pull just to make matters worse. Eventually we got to the end and breathed a sigh of relief as our knees were killing us!



And relax

The next bit was easy going back across the flat plateau but then it was up the hill again. At the top of the hill where it became flat and grassy again I stopped to ask Wendy if she'd taken a photo of the area.



Are we there yet?

She'd already done it on the way up but I then saw something and shouted over to Wendy, "Wendy there's a Wader just over there.....OMG it's a **Dotterel!**" I couldn't believe it, having given up on Dotterel when we got up to the top but we'd finally completed the set of 3 birds that breed in the Cairngorms....Woo Hoo! :). I passed Lyca over to Wendy and went in to get a shot of it but it was incredibly skittish, unlike the tame nature of the Dotterel we were used to. It gave me the run around big time and just wouldn't stay still, so in the end I settled for this shot.



Dotterel

Further down we could hear people laughing in the distance, so we had a look around to see where it was coming from. There was a patch of snow in a corrie to our right with a group of kids with 2 adults and a dog sliding down the slope in a line. They sounded like they were having fun and even the dog was joining in. When we got back to the path where we'd had the Black Mountain Moth we kept our eyes peeled but didn't find another, which was hardly surprising. We eventually got back onto the familiar path down the mountain and we could see the car park in the distance.



Still going

By then our knees were feeling decidedly ropey and our legs were shaky. We really should've taken more food and drink with us but it was too late for that and we just had to press on. It felt as though we were nearly there but considering we never usually go up any higher than we were at that point we realized that we still had a fair distance to go.

Much further down when we were nearly at the bottom I spotted a Dart, which I presumed was just a Common Dart and Wendy found a huge **Frog** on the path. I bent down to get a photo but it hopped off into the heather before I got the chance. We started to walk along the flat section at the bottom of Cairngorm, which Wendy reminded me feels like it takes forever.....Urrghhhh! It does though! Our legs were getting a bit past it by then but we knew we were on the home straight.....Yey! There was a family up ahead all armed with bins, scopes and cameras who when we approached asked, "Have you seen any Dotterel?" They'd been told to look above The Corrie so when Wendy told them where we'd had ours their faces dropped. The Dad jokingly said that they'd have to walk a bit further up but I think they gave up after that. I then noticed my phone was on just 1% after tracking our entire walk using GPS. I was gutted to think that the battery was going to die before we could find out how far we'd walked and seen all the altitude changes and other stats :(When we got to the ski lifts Wendy said that she needed to go the Café and WC's 1st because if she sat down in the car she'd never get back up again. I told her I couldn't wait for her and was going to have to go back to the car to take the rucksack and camera off my back before I collapsed under the weight.

I staggered off with Lyca down the steps to the lower car park and was very relieved to finally sit down in the car.....Phew! It was 3.32pm by then and lunch was well overdue, so I grabbed the bag and got everything out for when Wendy got back. I put my phone on charge straight away in the hope it was still hanging on and much to my relief it hadn't died so I was able to save the walk.....Phew! The last thing I wanted having just walked up to Ben Macdui was to have lost all the stats right at the end. Wendy was back 10 minutes later clutching 4 big bags of Quinoa crisps and some Veggie jelly sweets but was very annoyed that she'd picked up the wrong drink for me. She said that in the WC's she felt as though she was on the boat and in the Café she just felt away with the fairies so she'd ended up getting me a diet Irn Bru instead of normal. DIET? Like as if I needed a diet drink after that walk! I wasn't going to send her back to change it though, I'm not that cruel..... :). We ate our lunch with surprisingly little gusto but I think we'd gone past the point by then and were just too tired. Another thing I'd noticed is that my shoulder was really sore :/. I'd never walked up the 2nd highest mountain in Britain with my camera and a rucksack before or for that distance on any walk in one go, so wasn't entirely surprised. Fortunately though my toe was still OK despite the hours of abuse it'd been made to suffer.....Phew! I had a look at my phone and found out that we'd done 33,578 steps, walked 11.58 miles and climbed the equivalent of 288 flights of stairs in 5 hours 8 minutes, so it was no wonder we felt knackered! With good old hindsight we probably should've taken more food and water with us but we honestly didn't appreciate how long it was going to take or how far it actually was, it looked a lot shorter on the map! We both agreed that it was well worth doing though having seen everything we wanted but we both unanimously agreed, "Never again!" :P.

We left at 4pm and I hadn't gone far when Lyca appeared in the front seat :O! The whole reason I'd bought her a new seatbelt attachment was stop her from doing that, so how was she doing it again? I pulled over and stopped the car and got out for a look only to find that it wasn't entirely her fault. Her lead has a shock absorber bungee attachment on it to help us when she's pulling and I'd forgotten to take that off before I'd clipped her into her seatbelt. She'd somehow realized that she could stretch the bungee to the point where she could get onto

the front seat again....clever little ****! Grrrrrr! I sorted it out and we carried on with a very sulky looking dog in the back seat.

We reckoned we had just enough time and energy left to go and check out a place I'd found out about for White-faced Darter from the bloke looking at the Northern Damselflies a few days earlier. We joked about how jammy we'd be if we just rocked up and bagged ourselves a lifer, which we knew was just too far fetched for us especially having had such a good day so far. As we drove through Coylumbridge a convoy of about 30 bikers drove past us, closely followed by 10 more, so they must've been a Highland road trip or something. We passed a few more stragglers as we entered Loch Garten and Wendy finally spotted the boardwalk we were looking for.

At 20.5c it was warm enough when I parked up, so we crossed the road and looked down to the end of the boardwalk where there was a tiny pool. Uh? Compared to the other pools we'd seen it was more like a puddle and looked very unimpressive.



Is that it?

As we walked down we spotted a **Lizard**, which must've been sunning itself.



Lizard

I then saw a darter flying off from further up the boardwalk where it had been resting. It instantly returned so I got my bins on it and couldn't believe my eyes. Unbelievably I was looking at a **White-faced Darter**, so I quickly got Wendy onto it, as it was a lifer for us both. It flew off straight away, so we waited to see if it'd come back. While we waited I found a nice little moth, so I grabbed a quick shot to ID it with. Wendy had an idea what it was but would have to check the book later as she couldn't remember its name. The White-faced Darter eventually came back and it was a male too but it just would not land closer than the far end of the boardwalk, so I got a distant pic just for the article.



White-faced Darter

The sun was going in and out like a yo-yo, which wasn't helping matters. The Darter would disappear off the face of the planet when it went behind the clouds. Wendy noticed some **Sundew** amongst the Sphagnum Moss, so got me to get a photo.



Sundew

What we initially thought was a tiny and underwhelming pool had turned out to be a brilliant little spot. We had male and female White-faced Darters coming and going but when the sun went in behind a big bank of dark clouds and they disappeared again Wendy decided to call it a day. She went back to the car with Lyca and I stuck it out for 10 more minutes without any success but I did find a huge Spider that looked interesting, so I took its picture to show Wendy. I think it was a Raft Spider of some sort.



Raft Spider

I only had another brief sighting of a Darter, so I gave up too and was back at the car at 5.09pm. We couldn't believe how lucky we'd just been though, after joking about just turning up and finding a lifer Dragonfly we never once thought

it'd actually happen :). It was definitely time to head for home by then and drove back through Boat of Garten. We were shocked to see that since we'd been there in March they'd cleared a huge section of the forest just down the road from the Red Squirrel and Crestie feeders for building houses :O! It seemed ridiculous that they'd been allowed to destroy such a large chunk of habitat of 2 protected species but what do we know? There was a **Brown Hare** in a field we drove past near Aviemore and finally we pulled up outside HQ at 5.41pm.

After our long and very productive day Lyca absolutely wolfed her dinner and went into the living room to resume her position on her favourite settee. She was out for the count while Wendy ID'd the moth from earlier as a **Small purple-barred**.



Small purple-barred

After we'd both had baths we were ready for our tea, which was much later than usual considering we'd only eaten our lunch at 3.45pm! After that we set about ID'ing the Moths from the fridge, so we could let them go when it got dark. We were very impressed with we'd caught and only wished we'd been able to put the trap out more.

Moth List (* = lifers)

Common marbled Carpet x1

Toadflax Pug x1 *

Sallow Kitten x1



Sallow Kitten

White Ermine x1
Brown Rustic x7 *
Bordered White x3
Nut-tree Tussock x1



Nut-tree Tussock

Broom Moth x1
Female Ghost Moth x1



Ghost Moth

Aethes Smeathmanniana (micro) x1 *

Map-winged Swift x4



Map-winged Swift

Silver ground Carpet x1

Small-dotted Buff x1 *

Engrailed Clay x2

= 30 moths (17sp)

Lyca was absolutely zonked all night and we both felt pretty brain dead, so ID'ing the moths just about finished us off. After I'd taken pictures of all the Moths and let them go I took her out for a wee before we all collapsed into bed at 11pm.

Friday 24th June

After a good and well-deserved sleep we woke up at 7am and it was a sunny (wahey!!) start to the day. Getting out of bed we were reminded of our big walk from yesterday by our legs, which felt slightly achy but not too bad at all. I went straight to find out the outcome of the referendum and wasn't remotely shocked to see that the UK had voted out of the EU.....Urrghhhhhh! That was the worst possible news for the environment, so I ate my breakfast feeling depressed. Lyca had ignored her breakfast and gone straight back to bed after being out for a wee and Wendy was hoping for a laid back start to the day, so to try and cheer myself up I thought I'd take myself off to Loch Insh to see if I could get a better Osprey photo. The forecast for later in the day wasn't good and we were expecting thunderstorms from 1pm, so I didn't want to waste our last full day in Speyside.

When I arrived I could see the Ospreys at the nest, so I headed over the road and down the footpath.



Loch Insh

There was a pair of Bullfinches on the dark path and the female was collecting nesting material while the male watched over her. I tried for a shot but it was so dark the camera was having to use ISO16000!!



Bullfinch

Bullfinches are thought to remain close to where they were born and also mate for life, which is why you always see them in pairs even in winter. Looking up at the nest one of the Ospreys flew off leaving not 1 but 2 birds still there. I think 1 of them was a juvenile and it looked as if it was very near to fledging and was practically indistinguishable from the adult. Maybe we'd even see them fly before we left? There was a Goldeneye with 3 x chicks out on the Loch but it wasn't possible for me to get any decent photos of the Ospreys, as they were still too far away, so I only took one with my teleconverter on and then headed back to HQ.



Osprey

We didn't have a clue where to go next with the weather forecast looking so dodgy but I reckoned that if we hurried we might just have time to try Uath Lochans before the rain started. This was the day I'd planned to go to Chanonry Point but we had hours to kill before high tide and also had another new place to try on the Black Isle. Wendy put clingfilm over Lyca's breakfast to bring with us in the hope that she'd eat it later and we left at 9.59am. The grey clouds were already closing in on us but we carried on regardless, as we didn't have much choice. We were cheered up briefly by a bloke, who came round a corner, on some skis with wheels on them! He had poles and everything and was 'roller skiing' down the road like his life depended on it so we presume he must've been training for something. Wendy was gutted that she didn't have time to get a photo of him because it looked really funny :P.

I'd always planned to go to Uath Lochans as if the sun was out we would be in Dragonfly heaven but the weather had been so bad it'd been pointless. When we got there it was 10.07am and the Loch at the car park looked like a mirror, it was so calm. Wendy instantly jumped out of the car to go over and get a photo, as it was the 1st time during the past week she'd seen a Loch so still.

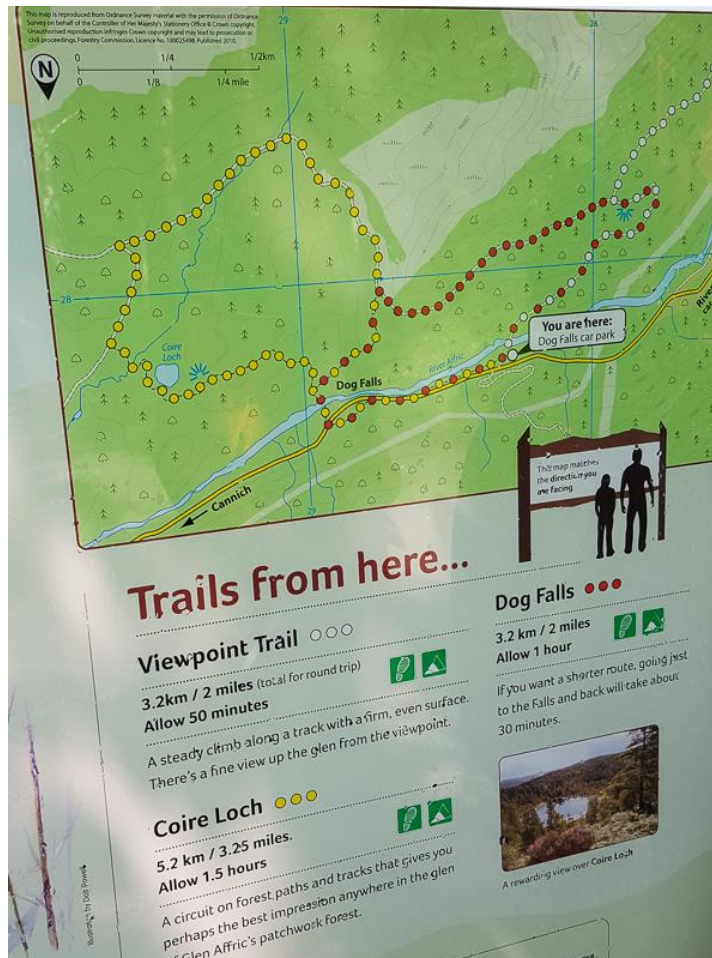


Uath Lochans

There was a female Goldeneye out there too but within the blink of an eye the mirror had vanished and the rain started.....Boooo :(It was only a light shower and we could see more blue sky up ahead, so it was still looking doable. There was only one other car parked up and the people who'd been walking their dog came back, so we waited for them to go before setting off. Last time we'd been there in summer we'd failed to see what we wanted and I'd really hoped to turn it all around this time. We could hear Crossbill calling and apart from bird song it was totally silent. We walked around the 1st Loch and found the path which leads to the others Lochs but when we noticed a guy with a dog coming up behind us we let for him go past us. We stood under the trees waiting but the sky had turned a nasty shade of grey, the wind had picked up and the rain had become heavier rather than easing off. In fact the conditions were perfect for every single Dragonfly or Butterfly to make a hasty retreat and vanish.....Urrghhhhhh! It didn't look like it was going to clear up in a hurry either (god knows where the blue sky patch went to!!) so we turned around and went back to the car. Needless to say that the rain did stop when we were approaching the car park but it was too late to go back by then. Back at the car it was 10.36am and it went really dark and started raining again, so we'd made the right decision after all. After that I decided to go somewhere different than the original plan as the forecasted rain looked like it might miss that area so we set off for our longest drive of the week.

It was a completely new area to try, which I'd only recently learned about and it looked really good if the weather conditions were right. Glen Affric was part of The Great Glen, supposedly the most beautiful glen in the whole of Scotland and a hotspot for dragonflies with Downy and Northern Emerald and Golden-ringed Dragonflies. All the books mentioned Dog Falls so that's where I reckoned we should go. It looked as though it was only a short walk as well which meant we'd have loads of time to get to Chanonry point for the dolphins afterwards. Sorted! It felt like we'd been driving for ages when we got to Inverness and because we were going to Glen Affric 1st it meant we'd taken a different route past Loch Ness. By the time we reached Cannich Wendy was bursting, so I stopped at the Community Hall and she nipped into the WC's. She was very impressed at how clean they were, so it'd been a good move. She could probably write a Guide Book of the best Public Toilets of Scotland by now!

The road around Glen Affric was small and winding, so it was a slow drive to the car park at Dog Falls. Eventually we arrived at 12.32pm, I found a space in the busy car park and got out to go and get a ticket from the machine and to check out the board with the trails on it. More importantly the sun was out but there were clouds in the sky so we had to get a move on.....Eeek!



Map

As I approached the ticket machine a young German guy asked me how long I was going to be and offered me his ticket, as it still had 2 hours left on it. How nice of him was that? It's funny how it's always the foreigners who offer their tickets up. Brexit can get stuffed! Obviously I took him up on his kind offer and thanked him very much. I went back to get Lyca and we all headed off along the river, after having decided to do the yellow Coire Loch Trail. It says in the book, "Look out for Dipper as you walk along the river" but we didn't see one.



Very nice

Next it looked like we needed to go up a footpath, which Wendy was not too chuffed with. After all the walking upwards yesterday she really wished we could just do a nice flat walk for a change. We go to the top of the path only to find that it went straight back down to the road we'd joined it on, so the whole thing had been a waste of time and energy and we could've just walked along the flipping road! I had a look at the leaflet I'd picked up and we carried on until we could see a bridge over the river. This was more like it and we could hear a Wood Warbler and Tree Pipit singing in the trees. We headed over and found a narrow wooden bridge, which was high above the river.



Dodgy bridge

I went 1st with Lyca and Wendy followed but not being a fan of heights I found my legs turning to jelly. The handrail either side was below thigh height, so would probably be of a hindrance if you were to lose your balance. It looked the perfect height to just catapult you over onto the rocks below :/. The sun was still hanging on and having dressed for the cold we started to get too hot. To make matters worse we had another steep climb ahead of us, so we huffed and puffed our way up to the top. After that the path leveled out for a while and then

dropped steeply down, which after yesterday was a knee killer. When we got the bottom there was yet another steep climb upwards and we were sweating buckets by then. We were glad to get to the top again and walked along the path through the woods. What goes up must go down as they say and when we turned a corner Wendy's heart sank. At the bottom of another steep path was the Loch in a clearing amongst the trees and that was where we were going!



Oh no!

She was ½ tempted to stay at the top while I went down for a look but curiosity got the better of her in the end. Our knees were not thanking us as we scrambled our way down the path but we heard a Crossbill and the sun was still out, so were feeling quite hopeful.

There was already a bloke down at the Loch with a camera, so we got chatting and found out that he was from Essex and had dropped by on his way up north to Orkney. That's some drive!



Coire Loch

Before long we had Large-Red Damselflies and Four-spotted Chasers everywhere but that wasn't what we were after. Every Dragonfly that came near us was just a 4-spot and it started to drive us mad. Then the bloke announced that he had an Emerald, so we had our eyes out on stalks. The problem was that although the 4-spots were landing the Emerald wasn't and was just flying up and down the pool behind all the grasses. When we did catch a glimpse of it we could see that it was a different shape to the 4-spots, held itself differently and was green but that was as good as it got. Trying to keep it in your bins was impossible and every time it looked as though it was going to land and a 4-spot would chase it off.....Grrrrrrr! Lyca was being very well behaved, seemed to like the bloke and was curled up on the ground next to us. He even commented as what a patient dog she was. If only he knew :P.



Like butter wouldn't melt!

We asked the bloke about Northern and Downy Emeralds and he said that you didn't get Northern there. You could find them further up the Glen, so the ones we were seeing were **Downy Emerald**. That was still good enough for us and a lifer, so I thought I'd better try and get at least a record shot of one. The bloke joined in too but it wasn't easy trying to get a shot of one in flight and I just wished one of them would land! Eventually I got one where you can see it's an Emerald but that's about all you can say!



Downy Emerald

All of a sudden some clouds came over and it looked like the best of the weather was over for the day. As soon as the sun went in all the insects disappeared but the Downy Emerald flew over us and landed high up in a tree. I rushed over to try and see if I could find it and luckily I did, so I tried for some shots. The bloke came over and joined in too and although it was in anything but a good position at least it was finally staying still.



Downy Emerald

Holding my heavy camera set up vertically wasn't easy and when I couldn't take the weight anymore I gave up. Wendy was getting bored by then and it looked like it was going to rain soon, so she was eager to get going. I packed up and we said, "Bye" to the bloke who went off in the opposite direction to continue the path. I looked at the trail map in my pocket and reckoned we'd be better going back the way we came, as it looked quicker but if we'd had time I would've loved

to have continued on. We passed quite a lot of people, so it's obviously a popular place especially with foreign tourists as most people seemed to be from Europe. Our knees protested at every steep downward path but we couldn't afford to stop or slow down if we were to beat the rain. The bridge didn't seem so bad on the way back and when we were back on the road we thought we were nearly there. In reality the road went on for longer than we remembered and it was starting to feel quite muggy again, so we hoped it wasn't going to turn into a thunderstorm. We didn't hear the Wood Warbler again and hadn't had any more in the woods either, so bird wise it hadn't been very good. Apart from Crossbill the only other bird of note we saw was a Bullfinch in the road when we were heading towards the car park.

It was 2.30pm when we got back to the car and as soon as we got in and shut the door the heavens opened....Phew! Wendy thought she'd try Lyca with her breakfast again and this time she ate it. We'd been gone a lot longer than I'd thought we'd be and noticed that the car park ticket had run out 45 minutes ago.....Oooops! We ate our late lunch quickly, as we still had to get out to Chanonry Point before the tides were wrong and the Dolphins cleared off. It was disappointing to have not seen Golden-ringed Dragonfly but we'd been lucky to get enough sunshine to see Downy Emerald, which was a lifer for us both. We'd also been lucky to have got Lyca out for a walk without getting soaked considering the day was meant to have been a wash out :).

We left at 2.49pm having spent more time at Glen Affric than we'd expected but we hoped we wouldn't be too late for the Dolphins. The sun reappeared when we were going back through Cannich, so the day had panned out better than what was forecast. It was too warm in the car and since my air con seems to have stopped working properly Wendy had her window down. All of a sudden a huge Bumble Bee flew in through her window and smashed against mine with a loud thud! I slammed on my brakes in shock and watched it drop between the door and my seat. I leapt out of the car quicker than I thought was humanly possible and had a look to see if I could find it. Luckily it was in reach, so I grabbed a piece of paper and fished it out. It looked like it had a broken wing from the impact but I took it over to where there were some flowers and left it there to give it a chance. I set off again only for the same thing to happen about 30 seconds later and I slammed my brakes on again! This time the insect looked very wasp like and after saying that it better not be I quickly shrieked, "OMG it's a wasp!" Unbelievably it flew straight into my foot well and up behind the peddles....Aarrghhhhhh! It wasn't coming out in a hurry either but we couldn't sit there waiting for it all day, so I set off again. Neither of us were very comfortable with the situation and the fact that I knew it was somewhere by my feet was distracting to say the least. I needed to concentrate on the unfamiliar road ahead of me not whether a wasp was going to fly up my trouser leg and sting me! Eventually it flew out and into the back where Lyca was.....Great! All we need was it to land on her and sting her or something, so I pulled over again. By the time I'd got out to investigate we think it'd flown out of the back window, or at least we hoped it had! With the wasp seemingly gone I was able to relax a bit but this time we made sure all the windows were up before setting off again. We saw a Red Kite flying over the town of Beuly and an Osprey with a fish near Inverness. After Inverness we saw 2 more Red Kites, so we knew we'd hit the Black Isle at last. Driving through the golf course on the approach to the car park we heard a Yellowhammer and I parked up at Chanonry Point at 3.55pm, which unfortunately was very close to high tide time :(.

The car park was full but there was no sign of any people at the Point and more to the point no Dolphins. We got out for a wander anyway and Wendy spotted some **Knot** flying up the beach but the tide was right in, so we couldn't walk up the beach like we normally do. Instead we had to take the path, which ran past and round the back of some houses to the beach. What a view to have from your window! We noticed that since we'd been there last The Point had some money spent on it and it looked much better for it too.



Chanonry Point

That didn't make the fact that the sea was dead, it was windy and freezing cold any easier to bear though. There was nothing out to sea apart from Common Terns but then I heard a familiar sound and spotted 2x **Sandwich Terns** flying past. We stood shivering for as long as Wendy could stand before she got fed up and wanted to go. A few people started to turn up including a guy with a camera, so I was convinced that if we'd stuck around the Dolphins would show. Apparently the best time for them is supposed to be 2 hours either side of high tide but we'd turned up bang on high tide....Doh! Wendy wasn't so sure and thought that they were just there by chance hoping to see them, especially when 2 of them left straight away. Eventually I had to admit defeat and we rushed back to the car to warm up ... gutted! It was 4.25pm when we left and shortly after it started to rain. It didn't stop for the entire drive home either and both of us felt so tired but knew we had loads to do when we got back.

It'd taken us just over an hour to get home and I parked up outside HQ for the last time at 5.30pm. It was so wet out that Wendy announced that she would carry Lyca into the house to save her from getting soaked and muddy paws. She got her from the back seat and I went ahead to open the house. Wendy couldn't shut the car door, so I leant over from the raised path above to shut it for her but under all the weight I was carrying I lost my balance and began tipping over the edge! Somehow (I'm not sure how) I managed to throw my weight backwards in panic and saved myself from falling head 1st down the 5 foot vertical drop onto the tarmac below. For quite a few minutes afterwards I was in a bit of shock as if I'd gone over the edge I wouldn't have had any hands free to break my fall not that hands would've helped much. I could've easily broke my neck.....very scary. That path really is lethal! Wendy was pretty blasé as usual but after a few hours

I got over it! After my near death experience we had tea and baths before Wendy started to do as much packing and cleaning as she could before the morning. By the time Tesco came it was gone 8.30pm and there didn't seem to be much in our order but at least we had some basics to bring with us. I started to feel dizzy and not too good at all, so knowing I had a long ahead of me tomorrow I ended up going to bed at 9.55pm. Lyca followed me leaving Wendy on her own but she soon realized that there was nothing on TV, so ended up going herself at 10.20pm. Maybe I was feeling rough due to the thought of our adventure into the unknown to come but that's a different story :P.

Continued in Part 2 :)