

After a stressful Christmas time with Wendy having been totally out of action with a torn a disc in her back swiftly followed by another house move we were desperate for a break. In January I gave someone a ring in the slim hope that his cottage would be free in March and was astounded to find that it was :O! We'd stayed there before and had been very impressed by a) the cottage and b) the Red Squirrels and Cresties in the back garden, so it could just be the tonic we both needed. After a quick check with both work places and the Steam Packet to ensure there was a dog cabin available we were all set for a week at Clunymhore in Nethybridge, Cairngorms. Wendy was certain that her back would be sorted by the time we went but 3 months on and it was still giving her loads of grief....Uh oh!

Having not taken any photos in months I realized how out of practice I'd become when a Firecrest was found in the Isle of Man a few weeks before our trip. Trying to take photos of that in the dark woods made me adamant to pull my finger out and I finally gave in to the temptation of buying a new camera. I decided to upgrade to the new version of my camera, a 7D mkII. I hoped that the higher ISO and more rapid shooting and focus would come in very useful in the dark woods of the Abernethy Forest. Those new features could easily mean the difference between no shot and getting something usable.

The trip came round very quickly and in some ways we didn't want to go as Wendy's back was still far from fixed and we were just starting to get settled into the new house. When we started to think about the Highlands in late winter our minds started to sway and we were raring to go, even if it meant that Wendy couldn't do as much as she normally would.

Friday 6<sup>th</sup> March

Unbelievable the forecast for ridiculously high winds was accurate and the highest wind speed we'd had for weeks would hit at exact time we were going to be on the boat....Aarrghhhhh! Also, just to stick the knife in, the highest wind speed in the whole of the Irish sea would be in the exact spot where we'd be on the boat.....Great! This was giving me bad reminders of our ferry journey in 2013 when it was cancelled and we had to go a day later. The wind was a touch lighter than then but in a worse direction so I was fully expecting the horrible sideways rolling motion on this crossing.

We were at the Ferry Terminal at 7pm and I was amazed how calm Wendy was even when we got pulled over to be searched.....Again! The security ladies were very nice and didn't search much after spotting Lyca and giving her tons of fuss :P. Waiting to board we managed to get the trip list off to a great start.....with **Herring Gull**. It was 7.20pm when we boarded and we prepared ourselves for the worst. Wendy was OK as she'd taken Valium for her back, Stugeron for the rough crossing and had brought some rose so she could make Spritzers in the cabin but I couldn't take anything as I had a overnight drive as soon as we got off. It didn't help ease our minds when we walked to the cabin and noticed the 'wet floor' signs everywhere and then we spotted a nice pool of sick by one of the crew only doors!!

We set off at 7.38pm so there was no going back and the second the Ben left the harbour we were hit with a monster wave from the side and the boat rolled horrendously. It was easily the worst I've ever experienced on a boat journey and after that it continued to roll from side to side for the duration, but thankfully nowhere near as bad as the first. One wave sent my glasses flying off

the table and they slid across the floor at speed finally stopping outside to the toilet door!!! Lyca didn't know what to make of it all and although she'd had a couple of wobbly walks around the cabin she spent most of the journey tucked up with Wendy.



Not sure about this!

Finally at about 10.30pm the roughness dropped away as we got some shelter from Wales. I breathed a sigh of relief at having survived the trip without puking my tea up whereas Wendy had unsurprisingly slept from 10pm onwards.

We docked at 11.40pm, which was a bit later than usual. We'd been told by a staff member last time that we could take the dog blankets as they'd only throw them away, so we snaffled the lot, as they're very useful. Obviously we grabbed the 4 packs of biscuits too so Wendy's rucksack was stuffed to bursting point! :).

Walking down to the car Lyca got a lot of fuss from the other passengers and then behaved like a spoilt brat because she wasn't happy with being harnessed up in the back. It required a wrestling match to keep her out of the front seats!

The 1<sup>st</sup> job once we left the boat at 11.55pm was to stop at the terminal to let Lyca out for a wee as there was no way I was even going to attempt getting up to let her out during the rough journey across. Wendy used the stop off to go into the Terminal for some drinks and Lyca, who must've been bursting by then, had a wee.....Phew!

Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> March

We got going at 12.05am and I was a bit confused driving through Lancaster, as it was way busier than usual at that time. Luckily enough there weren't any crashes this time and we got onto the M6 north safe and sound and I put my foot down. At 1.20am we cheered as we passed the 'Welcome to Scotland' sign.

At 1.44am we arrived at the Dumfries Travelodge and as usual it was absolutely chucking it down so Lyca's paws were instantly filthy. With Wendy not being able to lift anything, I did all the donkeywork and carried all the bags up the 2 flights of stairs. We passed a small group of teenage girls in the corridor so Lyca was yet again the centre of attention. When we let ourselves into the room Lyca jumped straight onto the bed covering the whiter than white sheets in muddy

paw prints.....Nooo! She instantly made herself at home though and took the prime position.



Bed time :)

All 3 of us fell asleep as soon as our heads hit the pillows.....Zzzzzzzzzzzzz.

I woke up at 7am followed by Lyca at 7.30am and after a quick look out the window I could see it was very overcast and threatening rain, just as the forecast had predicted.....Urrghhhhh! Using my head, having learned my lesson on a previous trip, I nipped straight over to the petrol station next door to top up the fuel. This should stop us from having the mass panic of nearly running out of fuel approaching Aviemore later in the day again. After getting back and letting Lyca out Wendy finally dragged herself up at 8am but the wine, stugeron and valium cocktail from the previous night looked like they'd taken their toll. Narky is not the word, she was wanting to just doze for a bit longer but unfortunately I knew we had to get going pretty quickly if we wanted to be in Aviemore before Tesco closed. Lyca had her breakfast in the room before we left but we'd have to wait for ours and would have to make do with a breakfast bar to tide us over. While I carried all the bags and gear back down to the car to load up I clocked up **Wood Pigeon, Blue Tit, Jackdaw, Blackbird, Chaffinch, Rook, Collared Dove** and **Carrion Crow**. Wendy was still a bit narky by the time I was motioning to go but I think the fact she hadn't gone through her usual morning routine wasn't helping!

In the car we heard a **Goldcrest** calling and then had a **Cormorant** fly over. We quickly ate our lovely filling breakfast of a cereal bar, so Wendy could finally take her painkillers and we set off. Just as I was pulling away a man ran over and knocked on my window. He told me I'd left the small suitcase outside the boot.....Whoops! Thank god for that nice bloke!



Dumfries Travelodge

We left at 8.54am and shortly after spotted a **Buzzard** flying over the road and a **Mute Swan** in a roadside pool. Through the heavy rain we saw some **Feral Pigeons**, **Black-headed Gulls** and 2x **Mistle Thrushes** flying over the fields and at 9c it was much milder than when we'd last been up there. A bit further up the road Wendy spotted 2x **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** in a field and a dead Badger in the middle of the road, closely followed by another. Although it's never nice to see a dead animal in the road they were definitely genuine road kills by the look of it, which made a nice change! Next up we saw **Coot** and **Tufted Duck** on a roadside Loch and a flock of **Starlings** going about their business.

It was 9.22am when we arrived at our 1<sup>st</sup> stop off, Carlingwark Loch and Lyca was pulling on her harness whinging to get going. With so little about at the time we didn't have anywhere to hit on the way up north so we just stuck to our tried and tested sites. Carlingwark did have a potential lifer for Wendy though but knowing the place well by now we weren't remotely optimistic, as the birds are always so far away. It looked grim outside with the grey sky so the prospect of getting out for a walk wasn't really very enticing. We just wanted some proper breakfast so the sooner we got it out of the way the sooner we could do just that :).



Carlingwark Loch



Looking out of the car windows we could see **Goldeneye** out on the Loch and there was a nice Lesser Black-back sitting on the edge nearby, so I couldn't resist grabbing my camera for a shot. The bird was very obliging and since it was so gloomy it was a nice test of the high ISO capability of my new 7D mkII.



Lesser Black-backed Gull

There were also **Mallard** and **Oystercatcher** on the banks of the Loch and we picked up **Blue Tit**, **Great Tit** and **Siskin** in the surrounding trees. We looked around hoping for a Brambling or 2 but quickly realized how lucky we'd been to find the huge flock of them there on a previous visit. Everywhere had been covered in thick snow then, so obviously with the milder winter this year they were elsewhere. Lyca started to get very excited and we turned around to see a playful looking Poodle called Carly running towards us with a young girl of about eight. Luckily Lyca was up for it and the pair of them chased each other around and gave us all a good laugh. Their characteristics were so similar and Cockerpoos most definitely get their style of play from the Poodle in them. The girl was really friendly and obviously having noticed our bins and cameras told us that she also like going out watching birds with her Dad.

After that we carried on and went through the gate and down the road. When we rejoined the footpath next to the Loch we were reminded as to how muddy it was. We squelched and skirted our way through and around the muddy puddles as best we could but Lyca was inevitably filthy within minutes. Looking out over the Loch finding Wendy her lifer was looking very doubtful to say the least. The Ducks were all miles off as usual and it was going to be practically impossible to pick out any detail to clinch the ID of a different but very similar looking Duck to the Tufties. Scanning the trees we found **Song Thrush**, **Chaffinch**, **Wren** and a flock of **Goldfinches** flew in but apart from adding **Moorhen** the Loch itself looked pretty uninspiring. Wendy had even noticed the apparent lack of Little Grebes, which we found very strange but as soon as we sat down in the hide at the end of the path Wendy chirped up with, "**Little Grebe!**" All of a sudden they were everywhere, popping up from dives all around us. It was a good job too because we wouldn't be able to guarantee them anywhere else. There was a Heron on the far side of the bank but try as we might we couldn't see anything

resembling the 2x Ring-necked Ducks we'd gone for. At least Lyca had stretched her legs and we hoped that by tiring her out she might be able to cope better with the long drive she had ahead.

Not wanting to waste too much time we called it a day and headed off back through the mud to the car. The trees which had been pretty dead on our way there were now full of life and I had to stop to try for a dark shot of a **Treecreeper** as it made its way up a tree right next to us.



Treecreeper

While I was doing that a **Greenfinch**, **Robin** and **Dunnock** put in an appearance before Wendy heard then found a couple of **Redwing** flying through. As we approached the car park a runner came round the corner and the poor guy must've had a shock when Lyca decided to go chasing after his ankles! Embarrassing is an understatement! Back at the car I'd started to feel sick and realized that I could still feel the motion of being on the boat.....Bleurghhhh! Wendy could feel it too but didn't feel sick at all and the prospect of having the nice breakfast I'd been looking forward to was beginning to sound far less appealing to me by the second. We added **Common Gull** to our list before I drove away at 10.36am to head for Galloway Lodge where Wendy was planning to buy the entire shop out of her favourite chutney to bring home and we were going to get some food.

Luckily it wasn't that far away and just before turning into Gatehouse of Fleet Wendy spotted 100's of **Pink-footed Geese** in a field and a bit further on a handful of **Whooper Swans**. I parked up in the car park next to Galloway Lodge and we left Lyca in the car so we could go into the shop. Wendy was going to need a hand carrying all the jars plus our food and drinks, so I was required to go in as well. While Wendy stripped the shelf bare and piled jar after jar into the increasingly heavy basket I wondered if there'd be room in the car! Luckily she stopped before my arm fell off and she paid at the counter before we headed into the café. Although I was still feeling sick our choices had been made before we'd even gone away. I was having a square sausage bap and Wendy a cheese and

tomato toastie and cappuccino.....yum yum :). At the end of the counter were some lovely looking cakes so I couldn't turn down a slice of chocolate gingerbread cake either, much to Wendy's disgust :P. We took it all back to the car to eat and it certainly didn't disappoint with Wendy yet again saying that they make the nicest toasties she's ever had. After we'd polished off the lot our bellies were well and truly stuffed and fuelled up for our next stop off.

Before we left we had a quick look for the Kingfisher and Dipper up the river but it was so high that neither birds would've been anywhere near! I'd never realized the river there was tidal. We heard **Curlew** calling from somewhere overhead on the way back to the car and as we drove through the main street Wendy got me to stop at a cash machine. I parked up along side it and she got out to get some money. As I sat waiting an old lady came out of the house I'd parked in front of and stared with disgust at me. I smiled nicely back at her but she walked about 10 yards away and carried on staring! Hahahaha very odd. Just as Wendy was about to get back into the car so we could finally get going she spotted a new Deli, which wasn't there last year.....Nooooooooooooo! She of course had to pay it a visit and spent what felt like hours in there but finally emerged with another bag of goodies. When she'd paid for her stuff she'd been told that it was now law to not give out bags to shoppers. This is of course a great idea in theory but Wendy had joked that when you're going on holiday the last thing on your packing list is your collection of 'bags for life'! She'd reluctantly been given a bag at a cost of 5p, which is better than trying to carry it all at the risk of smashing it in the middle of the street and getting a hefty fine for littering instead!

We finally left Gatehouse of Fleet at 12.01pm and before long we were driving through Laurieston and Red Kite country.



Laurieston

As soon as we rounded the corner to the fields where we always have them a **Red Kite** appeared. It was closely followed by 4 more and further down we had another 5, so I got out of the car and grabbed my camera. With the sky being so grey and dull none of them were photographable but we were hoping that one of them would drop down lower against the trees to give me a better chance of a shot but instead they went behind them, so I had to give up. We then heard the high-pitched sound of a flock of **Long-tailed Tits** and Wendy's eyes nearly popped out of her head when she spotted one in a tree right next to the car. She turned to get her camera from the foot well in the back where it'd normally be



but it was still in the boot.....Aarrghhhh! This being the case the bird stayed there for ages and she just had to sit there and frustratingly imagine the kind of shots she could be firing off! As I was getting back into the car she spotted some Thrushes hopping around in a field and wondered if they were Fieldfare. We both raised our bins to find that they were indeed **Fieldfare**. With both Redwing and Fieldfare having been disappointingly thin on the ground in the IOM over the winter we'd now seen both on our 1<sup>st</sup> morning of the trip.

It was already 12.29pm when we arrived at Ken-Dee Marshes and as we prepared to set off I spotted a **Brown Hare** in a field. The car park was empty apart from us, so it looked like we had the place to ourselves. I let Lyca off her lead for the walk down the fence lined track and she ran backwards and forwards excitedly, hopefully tiring herself out for later :).



Freedom!

We stopped at the stream at the bottom for a scan, as we'd had Bullfinch there in the past but it was very quiet. Wendy had a hunch and when she finally saw something out of the corner of her eye that initially looked like a yellow leaf falling into the stream she'd been right. She called out, "**Grey Wagtail!**" and got me onto it, through the overhanging branches, sitting on a small rock in the middle. While we were looking at that I picked up the call of a **Nuthatch**, which we then watched for a bit and I even managed to get a distant record shot.





Nuthatch

Apart from that there wasn't much about, so we carried on to the hide hoping for better luck there.

We had a thorough check of the trees around the hide for Red Squirrel but there was no sign, so we went in and sat down. The feeders were really busy with all the usual Tits and Finches and we added **Coal Tit** to our list.



Loch Ken

There was now only 1 more possible Tit to add to our list there but as we'd learned in the past it would be very hit and miss. To keep herself entertained Wendy was able to use her camera propped up on the windowsill so we both used the abundance of common birds to get us back into the swing of photography. Totally engrossed in playing with my new toy imagine my surprise when a lovely **Willow Tit** flew in, so I called it to Wendy. She couldn't get up quick enough and the bird had gone again by the time she made it over, so next up was a waiting game. We sat for ages going between waiting for it to reappear and trying to get shots of the Nuthatches, which would only land on a twig for a

split second before annoyingly dropping down onto the feeders again. Surprisingly there was no sign of any Woodpeckers but we picked up **Lapwing**, **Pintail**, **Teal** and **Shoveler** out on the Loch. The Willow Tit kept toing and froing and even stuck around for long enough (although it never kept still!) to enable us both to get some passable shots of it.



Willow Tit

Eventually Wendy's back started to tell her that it'd had enough, so not wanting to push it at such an early stage of the trip she had to give up. All of a sudden all the Duck's were flushed into the sky and I spotted a **Peregrine** blasting through. After that bit of action we decided to get going and headed back up the track to the car park.

Ambling our way uphill we noticed some noisy **Greylag Geese** flying over and one of them looked quite stripy underneath. With that I decided to take the small detour to the Goose Viewing Platform to confirm my suspicions. As we walked through the muddy field Wendy picked up a **Skylark** singing overhead before we stopped at the platform for a look. The Geese were, of course, all miles away at the bottom of the hill but luckily some more flew over us and we were able to unexpectedly add **White-fronted Goose** to our list. There were some **Canada Geese** down at the bottom too but with our mission accomplished we didn't stick around. Back at the car it was 2.30pm and after giving Lyca a drink and Wendy had relieved her bladder we set off again seeing a **Kestrel** flying over the fields.

I turned right out of the reserve and cautiously drove up the single-track winding road. All of a sudden, just to keep me on my toes and alert, some idiot came hurtling round the corner and nearly crashed straight into me :O! I swerved into the verge and he slammed on his breaks just in time to avoid the collision but it certainly raised the blood pressures a bit! There were more and more Red Kites as we drove away and it started to rain lightly which, given the dull sky, wasn't a surprise. Wendy spotted the unmistakable bright white blob of our 1<sup>st</sup> male **Goosander** of the trip as we passed a river and a **Magpie** flew over the road. Next up we had **Pheasant** in the fields but it started to get really dark and we

hoped that the weather wasn't going to crack up for the remainder of the journey. It's such a long way to drive and it's always a shame when the weather's bad because we can't see the scenery that would otherwise keep us interested. The sky started to brighten up again but looking further north it looked pretty grim. Further along I turned another corner where we came across a group of **Red-legged Partridge** in the road, running for their lives and ducking under a fence to get back to the safety of the fields. The single-track road we were on was slow going, so it felt like we were getting nowhere fast but eventually we made it onto the motorway.....Phew! I could now put my foot down and finally make some progress at last. This part of the journey is boring but just before Happendon Services we were reminded that you never know what you're going to see when Wendy shrieked, "**FOX!**" Something had caught her eye on the grass verge and when she'd looked she'd found a Fox trotting towards the road. She held her breath as it went to step out to cross the motorway but the heavy flow of traffic must've made it think better of it. Just before it took the fateful plunge it turned around, ran back up and sat down ½ way up the bank, probably waiting for a safer time. Wendy was very relieved and we were both pleased to have seen a Fox during our trip. Although the wily Fox had been lucky the same couldn't be said for yet another dead Badger at the side of the road.....Urrghhhhh!

Our lovely view was spoiled at 4.34pm when it started to absolutely chuck it down and we were beginning to get severely bored. The best we could pull out was a **Roe Deer** in a field but when we got onto the Perthshire Tourist Route we could just about see through the greyness that there was still snow on the tops of the mountains. I pulled over to get a quick pic before we carried on to our next point of interest.



Perthshire Tourist Route

With the weather being so bad there seemed little point being there when we hit the Amulree Road.





Amulree Road

All our hopes of seeing a Black Grouse went out the window, as we could only think they'd be keeping their heads well and truly down. We did see some **Red Grouse** though and there were **Wigeon** out on a Loch. Another Peregrine blasted over too but, as we'd suspected, our quarry was nowhere to be seen :(.

By then Wendy was on the look out for the next WC but the long and winding road stretched for miles ahead of us with no towns for miles. She didn't want to risk a roadside wee with there being no laybys either so she hung on. Imagine her relief when at 6.06pm we spotted a sign for the town of Aberfeldy, so after we'd found the public toilets I duly parked up. It was dark by then and Wendy's back was sore from sitting in the car for so long so I ran over to check them out first. They were pay to wee toilets and cost 20p so I fired my coin in.....only to have it fired back out at me at twice the speed. I tried several times but it wasn't happening. I then tried the disabled door but the same happened again.....Uh oh. I then noticed the door to the men's was actually slightly ajar so I opened it and peered inside. There was no light (due to the money not working), so I went to my pocket to use my phone torch but then realized my phone was still in the car being used as a Sat Nav....Aarrghhhh! By this point I was bursting too so there was no option but to attempt it in the dark and hope for the best. I managed it somehow and even succeeded in using the funky soap/water/dryer combo sink thing. I could see instantly that there was no toilet roll and the place suddenly became even less inviting when I clocked the bin for syringes and razor blades on the wall :O! Wendy was jiggling around in the passenger seat when I got back but after hearing my graphic description she decided not to bother. She'd hooked Lyca up to her lead so I took her out onto the grass where she performed, which made Wendy extremely jealous before we set off again with her looking anything but comfortable. I assured her that we'd be in Aviemore in just over an hour, so she'd have to hang on until we got to Tesco to use the loo's there if we didn't find anywhere else on route.

Needless to say, we didn't find another but at 7.30pm I screeched to halt outside Tesco in Aviemore and Wendy hobbled in while I parked up. She'd lasted since 2.30pm so she must've been very relieved! I met her, looking much happier, inside and we did a very quick shop to get all our basics in. We'd intended to go straight to the cottage to drop the bags off 1<sup>st</sup> to make room for all of the extra bags but with the car already full we'd have to do the rest tomorrow. We finally headed off for the last short stretch of our journey at 7.56pm and as we approached Nethybridge I realized that I'd totally forgotten where the cottage was. Having thought I'd remember I hadn't bothered to put it into the Sat Nav



before we'd left.....Oooooops! I followed my nose and drove slowly along the unlit road trying to find any familiar looking landmarks. We were keeping our eyes peeled for the cottage as well as paying attention to the road ahead and we were both feeling pretty tired and blurry eyed by then. It was dark and really windy and all of a sudden the leaves blowing across the road took on a different form. I noticed one of them looked like it was hopping and had to look twice.....What the? On closer inspection they weren't leaves at all but Frogs :O! There were loads of them hopping over the road and in the headlights we could see that some of them had been run over by cars already, so I slowed right down to avoid any more casualties.

Eventually we spotted the driveway and this time Wendy had to get out to open the gate. There were people staying next door and we just hoped that they weren't bird feeder rivals like last time. We parked up outside Clunymhore at 8.06pm and breathed a huge sigh of relief.



HQ

We were confident that it'd be lovely and warm and clean inside after our last stay there, which was just what we needed after our long day. Wendy took Lyca in while I got the bags out of the car and she went for a look around with fond memories. When I came in and found her in the living room she didn't look happy at all. It was freezing inside but she soon worked out why when she found that all the windows were open, so she set about closing them all. She reckoned she could smell the faint aroma of cigarette smoke, which could've been why. I have to say that I couldn't so who knows, maybe the previous occupants had just been a bit smelly? :P. Next she went into the kitchen to unpack the shopping and find a place for everything but found that the kitchen wasn't as clean as it had been last time either.....Grrrrrrrr! The carpets looked like they hadn't been hoovered for months and Lyca was far too interested in what she could find to eat off them. After we'd unpacked we quickly made tea and Wendy went off for a bath so I put all the cutlery, etc. through the dishwasher and decided to tackle the hoovering. I soon learned why the carpets were dirty when I realised that the hoover was absolutely useless! After all my effort they didn't look any different but hey ho. We sat down at 10pm to finally chill out and were already missing having Wi-fi. There were only about 6 TV channels too but we were too excited about what we'd find in the garden in the morning to care. The forecast for Monday was for very strong wind and snow, so we wanted to make the most of it until then. We were totally zonked, so gave up and went to bed at 11.15pm

imagining the Cresties and Red Squirrels that were going to greet us when we got up.

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> March

It was 7am when we woke up and peering out of the curtains we could see that it'd rained over night. Our hearts instantly sank when we saw that there were absolutely no birds in the garden and quickly realized why. There was no food in the very few feeders that were out there, so the 1<sup>st</sup> thing on our agenda would be to go shopping for some, to hopefully entice them back. We leisurely had breakfast, as Wendy's back wasn't feeling too good, so we weren't going to push it to get out early. Finally a Coal Tit flew in, which was soon joined by Great Tit, a pair of Blackbirds and a Dunnock. It wasn't exactly what we'd hoped for but it was a start at least. Wendy started to think about making lunch but we'd forgotten to get clingfilm at Tesco, so I suggested going to the local shop to pick some up as well as some bird food. This seemed like a plan and I set off at 7.50am only to find that as it was Sunday the Nethybridge shop didn't open until 9am.....Grrrrrrrr! I decided that in order to kill some time while I waited I'd go for a look at the feeders at Loch Garten. I pulled up in the car park under the feeders only to find that they were dead and had also been moved higher up in the trees. This was very annoying but I watched and waited anyway hearing a **Raven** overhead. After 15 minutes or so I couldn't believe my luck when 2x **Crested Tits** flew in on a lower tree, fed on something that look like peanut butter smeared on a branch then flew off. I repositioned myself to aim at the branch just in case and luckily enough they reappeared a few minutes later allowing me to snatch a few shots.



Crested Tit

My 7D mkII purchase had instantly paid off as I was shooting at ISO5000 in the very dim early morning light. An ISO that high was not possible on my old 7D and the fact that the shot is one of my best Cresties I've ever taken proved to me that the expense had been totally worth it.

They didn't come back again and by 8.30am I'd had enough and thought I'd chance my arm at Boat of Garten since it was only 5 minutes away. The shop there was also closed, so I headed straight for the car park and over to the

feeders. There was a Wildlife Tour guy standing there leading a collection of bored looking older folk with the exception of just one young lad. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the arse end of my 1<sup>st</sup> **Red Squirrel** of the trip as it ran away, never to be seen again. I didn't even consider that to be a good enough view to even count and again everywhere was very quiet. I was expecting these feeders to be caked in Red squirrels at this time of the year but it was looking scarily quiet. I had a quick look in the flood field over the road and found 3x Whooper Swans but no sign of the white-winged Gulls that were being reported daily.....Typical! My ears then pricked up when I overheard the Guide telling his group that it looked as though Crestie was going to be their bogey bird and I couldn't resist telling him about the 2 I'd seen at Loch Garten. When I did he looked gutted and said, "Bugger!" "We were there for an hour this morning and saw nothing." "I wish you hadn't said that now." Whoops! Maybe I should've kept my mouth shut after all? I gave it another non-eventful 5 minutes and then left feeling slightly guilty. Luckily I found another shop in Boat of Garten and grabbed some cling film, peanuts, seed and a huge fat ball and headed home.

As soon as I got back I gave Wendy the cling film so she started to make our sarnies while I went straight outside to put the bird food out. I was certain that I could hear Cresties calling as well as a GSW so I crossed my fingers that the food would do the trick. Back inside I watched the feeders intently and just 5 minutes later we had Great tit, Coal Tit, Chaffinch and Robin all feeding away merrily.....Yey! There was still no sign of any Red Squirrels though, not even in the trees in the distance :( Last time we'd stayed there they'd been right outside the patio doors in the garden and we'd filled our boots with pics every morning, which was why we'd chosen to stay there again.....Urrghhhhh! Having wasted enough time already we packed up and left at 10am.

Seeing as it was nearby and the sun was shining I thought that the feeders at Boat of Garten were worth another shot, so that was our 1<sup>st</sup> plan sorted. We parked up leaving Lyca in the car and wandered over to find loads of people there already. There were more birds about but still no sign of any Cresties, so we turned around and went back to the car. Next up was to go to the shop in Boat of Garten to find some insulation tape. The excess straps on Wendy's new bins desperately needed taming and were flapping around and getting in her way. We went in and Wendy was instantly drawn to the array of very nice but expensive gifts right by the entrance. She had a look around the rest of the shop next and was very surprised to find her favourite chutney from Galloway Lodge too! Apart from for our breakfast we needn't have detoured to the actual shop after all but it's good to know for future reference. There were all sorts of interesting Deli type goodies in there and I think she'd have spent a small fortune if she could've! I asked myself out loud if there was any square sausage in the fridge at the back of the shop and after looking said, in a terrible Scottish accent, "NoOOo" just as a bloke came up behind me and grabbed some milk :O. How embarrassing! We weren't on a shopping trip though so after grabbing the tape, a new bird feeder, more bird food and a freshly baked pan au chocolat we took it all back to the car. I set about demolishing the pan au chocolat while Wendy went into the Boat Hotel, which kindly opens its doors to the public to use their very nice, clean toilets. There were some **House Sparrows** in the bushes out the front chirping away noisily as I waited for Wendy, who quickly reappeared smiling and rubbing some posh smelling hand cream into her hands from the Hotel loos. This made a change from the usual look of disgust followed by the liberal dousing of antibacterial hand gel from her rucksack!

Still on the trail of Red Squirrels and Cresties I drove up the road and parked in the Boat of Garten Community Centre car park. I'd found out that there was a



nice loop walk through the woods to some feeders and thought it was worth a shot. We'd done the walk last June and had Green Hairstreak Butterflies and Cresties but I was planning a different route this time around. We set off and made a beeline for the feeders to see what we could find. It was disappointingly quiet in the trees and apart from the usual squeaks from the common birds we weren't getting good vibes. At the feeders we watched the Chaffinches coming and going and got the distinct feeling that we were wasting our time.



Boat of Garten Woods

All of a sudden we heard the call of a Crestie coming from deep in the woods and crossed our fingers. We gave it what seemed like forever and after realizing that there were no Squirrels around we were just about to make a move when a Crestie flew down to one of the feeders. I called it to Wendy, who was delighted and we watched it until it flew off. We stood with our cameras poised, just waiting for it to return but although we could still hear it calling it never came back. Still, we'd now both seen a Crestie and were happy with that, so we took the Squirrel trail back to the car park hoping that it did what it said on the tin.

It was a nice walk through the trees but totally Squirrel-less, so as it was en-route, we tried the feeders at the side of the road for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time that day! Standing looking bored were 2x older blokes with scopes, who were occasionally looking at the Gulls in the flood field over the road. We had a look for Squirrels but just like earlier there were none.....Aaaaarrghhhhhh! We felt sorry for one of the blokes, who had a terrible stutter and was quite hard to understand but we soon picked up on the fact that there was an Iceland Gull and Glaucous Gull in the area. We were just about to go when the Gulls lifted and the blokes got excited. One of them gave directions to the **Iceland Gull**, which I managed to get a brief view of before it flew behind the trees. Wendy who was standing behind us all didn't see it and they were obviously not planning on coming back any time soon. I thanked the bloke and we hung around for another 5 minutes desperately hoping for a Squirrel but gave up after that. We walked back up the path and Wendy spotted a dead Newt, which I picked up and she took a quick pic of so we could ID it later. Obviously Newts aren't something we'd come across in the IOM, so even a dead one was interesting to us. We found out later that it was a **Palmate Newt** but seeing as it was 'no more' I don't think we'll be ticking it as a lifer :P!





Ex Palmate Newt

The next part of the walk took us down the main road, which we'd never done before, back to the car park. I bombed back down to the Boat Hotel so Wendy could use their nice toilets again before we left and it started to rain. Good timing or what? It was 12.20pm by then so we saw this as the perfect time to have lunch, so I drove back to Loch Garten and parked up under the feeders to eat it, hoping for a Crestie or two.

There were loads of birds, mainly Chaffinches but not a single Crestie to be even heard. A Jay noisily flew in and when it made its way through the trees and out into the open really close to us I thought I'd better get my camera. As I reached into the back foot well the bird flew and was gone.....Typical! There was no point hanging around but when the heavens properly opened and scuppered all our plans of going somewhere else we thought it'd be the perfect time to go and do our proper shop. Being in Tesco isn't normally the way we'd choose to spend our days on holiday but with the weather being so bad it didn't feel like such a waste. While we were at the checkout the very friendly cashier chatted to us and explained that the snow had thawed so quickly this year, which was why there was so much water about. It was interesting to know the reason why the place looked so different to any of our other visits there in the past. We were now fully stocked up with food and having packed light could now do our washing when we needed to. Next, we went to The Heather Centre to stock up with more bird food and on the way home we went over Dipper Bridge. We couldn't believe how flooded the area was. We got out of the car to get some pics while we were there and further down the road it was even flooded in the fields behind the bank. Crazy snow thaw!



Flooding at Dipper Bridge

Driving past the fields and back towards Nethybridge my ears pricked up when Wendy chirped up with, "What are they?" I slowed down so we could look but quickly carried on when she followed it up with, "Oh, turnips!"

We were back at HQ very early at 3.15pm and after putting all our shopping away Wendy set about making a massive pan of soup to keep her going for the rest of the week. I went outside to set up the feeding station with all the new stuff we'd bought before going through the photos. All the peanut butter I'd smeared on the fence posts had been eaten, so I wondered what had eaten it.



Back garden feeding station

Wendy reckoned it had to be Crows but I wasn't going to give up that easily and chose to be more optimistic. While we ate tea at the huge dining table in the living room I noticed a couple of Roe Deer in the woods at the side of the house :). After watching them for a while I finally decided to go and get my camera and attempt some very poor shots through the dirty windows.





Roe Deer

Wendy went off for a soak in the bath after that and at 6.30pm it was starting to get dark, so I went outside to set my Dad's camera trap up. Brrrrrrrrr! It was freezing out there but if we caught a Pine Marten on it would be worth it. That was our ultimate hope of the trip and if we caught one on camera we'd be staying up the following night to see if we could catch a glimpse of it in the flesh. It was a long night with no Wi-fi and just 6 TV channels and although Wendy was happy to watch Top Gear she started to despair at what her life had become when 'Strictly come Darts' (or whatever it was called) was on. At 10.05pm she'd had enough and was falling asleep so we packed up and headed off to bed.

### Monday 9<sup>th</sup> March

After our early night, where we slept like the dead, we were unsurprisingly up early at 6.40am. This was typical, as the weather was forecast to be the worst of the trip, so we had no idea what to do. First thing on Wendy's agenda was to get Lyca to eat her flea and tick tablet, which should be easy. After her breakfast had been wolfed down she offered up the tasty treat and Lyca instantly spat it out! Even a coating of Marmite wouldn't coax her into eating it.....fussy little \*\*\*\*\*! Wendy put it back into its packet to save for later hoping for better luck next time. Weirdly, it was a lovely sunny start to the day and the sunrise coming up over the hill at the side of the house, where the Deer had been the night before, looked promising. Maybe they'd got the forecast wrong after all?

I went out to get the camera trap in and sat down with my breakfast to go through the night's footage. The feeding station I'd set up was totally empty so it looked hopeful but it was a very quick job checking the trap footage, as we'd caught absolutely nothing on it! Urrghhhhhh! Depression was already setting in and we gave up on all our hopes of getting anything remotely interesting in the garden. Last time we'd been there we could've happily stayed in all day and were firing off shots of Red Squirrels and Cresties through the back patio door but this time it was just yawnsome! At 7.40am some common birds started to come to feeders and 2x Treecreepers paid us a visit but after 10 minutes it was

dead again.....Boooooooo! :( Out of sheer desperation I decided to put the camera trap out while we were out to see what came in during the day but I wasn't expecting to find anything other than what we'd already seen.

With lunch made I packed up the car and we left at 8.24am and went down the road to the feeders at Loch Garten. I pulled up under them again to find that the food supply was running low and that there was no fat smeared on the branch either.



Loch Garten

It was really quiet, so I turned the car back on and we left. Next up was, of course, Boat of Garten feeders and when we arrived we were very pleased to find a Crestie feeding away on the peanuts :). We'd both brought our cameras so we reckoned it was worth sticking around for a bit. We watched it for ages feeding and were desperately willing it to land up on one of the branches so we could get a shot. When it finally stopped stuffing its face it didn't hang about and flew off into the forest. We waited patiently for it to return and waited.....and waited. We could hear it calling miles off and could even hear a 2<sup>nd</sup> bird calling back to it but it wasn't looking like either of them was in a hurry to come back. We'd been standing around kicking our heels for ages when all of a sudden Wendy let a HUGE gasp! Luckily I understood what she meant and looked in her direction only to see a Crestie sitting on a branch in the tree right next to her :O! We both stood there paralysed with our jaws nearly on the floor and by the time we'd got over the shock and went to raise our cameras the bird flew back to the feeder.....Aarrghhhhhh! OMG those birds are unbelievably quick! The 2<sup>nd</sup> bird came to join it for breakfast and we could hear another calling as well. Having missed the opportunity to get a belter of a shot we decided to call it a day, especially when it started to rain.

As we walked back to the car we started to notice how cold it was, the wind was icy and our fingers were bright red and frozen. It looked like it was turning into a day to crack open the hand and foot warmers and the forecasters appeared to have been right after all. I spun down to the Boat Hotel again for Wendy and she ran into the shop to get a pan au chocolat to share as well as a Highland Cow ornament she'd been eyeballing yesterday...Hahahahaha! I was totally stumped as to what to do next and with the wind having picked right up we'd have to pick somewhere sheltered, so Feshie Woods was about all I could come up with.



As I drove away the car temperature alerted me that it was 4c and the rain had turned into sleet....Grrrrreat! Not feeling remotely motivated we took a detour to the Village Centre Shops in Aviemore to try and pick up some bits and bobs from our list. We'd bought some brilliantly warm socks from there last year and with it being so cold we were after some more. As luck would have it they still had them in stock so we grabbed a couple of pairs each, which we really needed, as when we stepped back outside it had started to snow! Also, the car was now reading 3.5c, so our enthusiasm level took a nosedive and Wendy was really wishing she'd stayed in bed for a lie in. Wendy then nipped into the outdoor gear shops in the main street and picked up a new Buff, which she thought would come in handy to pull up over her face in the cold. I thought that the possibility of seeing some Scottish specialities in the woods could get her back on track but no, she was certain that everything would be keeping their heads well down in this kind of weather! Hoping she wasn't right I carried on regardless and coming out of Aviemore we were shocked to see that the wooden holiday lodges next to the river were dangerously close to being flooding out :O! There was nowhere to stop on the bridge to get a pic but I pulled over further down the road and took one of the fields.



Flooded field

When we got to the end of the road to turn off at Rothiemurcus we saw the sign flashing that due to the high winds the Cairngorm Snow Sport Centre, Fenuncular Railway and the Snow Gates further up the road were all closed! Even 2 years ago where everywhere was caked in snow we'd never seen Cairngorm closed, so it must've been bad.

It was 10.23am when we arrived at Feshie Woods and I parked up. The car was reading 1c and it was still snowing, so we prepared ourselves for a chilly time. I noticed that the signs warning people about Capercaillie weren't there, nor was the one telling a certain tour guide to keep out, so things didn't look good. Had they moved the Rogue male like Neil from next door had said they were thinking of doing due to all the human disturbance? We got out of the car to face the weather and try our luck but it was incredibly windy. It had started earlier and felt much stronger than forecast and the snow was hitting our faces so hard it stung like we being blasted with small frozen stones.....Ouch! Wendy, who had indeed pulled her Buff up over her nose was walking blind, as it was steaming her glasses up.....Hahahahaha! We couldn't think of anywhere else to go that would be more sheltered and Lyca needed a walk, so we carried on up the track and into the trees regardless.





Feshie Woods

The track was muddy and very wet, which made it pretty slippery underfoot and the trees didn't seem to be helping shelter us from the wind at all. All I could hear from behind was Wendy saying, "For god's sake, there's going to be no birds out in this weather!" and, "Urrghhhhh, this is just a waste of time!" When we started to climb the steep bank it was hitting us from the side and nearly blowing Wendy over but Lyca was totally unaffected by it. Wendy stopped to get some wobbly video, of Lyca and I walking up ahead, and took a couple of pics.



Wet dog

Her back wasn't very happy with the extra force it was being put under either but we hoped it would get better in the trees at the top. As we emerged onto the main path at the top we were hit by the strongest gust we'd ever felt, which made any walk we'd ever done in the wind seem like a light breeze. It was so strong that we had to stop and anchor ourselves to ground until it passed and this continued the whole way down. We were walking straight into the wind too and coupled with the snow stinging our faces and even our eyeballs it was challenging to say the least. At one point I decided to walk backwards to try and make it easier and when I looked up at Wendy she looked at me with a face that said it all and we started to laugh. It was soooooo bad it was funny and we



couldn't stop laughing either which just made walking even harder. We stood there paralysed by laughter getting battered by the wind like a pair of raving lunatics until our hysteria subsided and then carried on. Urrghhhhh! Looking through our steamed up glasses down to the end of the path, we unsurprisingly saw absolutely nothing apart from the end of the path. Grrrrrrrr! There was no sign of the rogue male Caper strutting his stuff to make our hideous walk worthwhile. Wendy smugly proclaimed, "Told you so!" but so as not to be beaten I went onto a different track with Lyca, who was having a wail of a time. Wendy reluctantly followed us but stayed near the bottom to get more video of the trees around us bending like they were made of rubber in the gusts. Finally I admitted that it was hopeless and gave up, so we all set off back to the car with the wind thankfully behind us.

We were back at the car at 11.28am and after our 'invigorating' walk we were very pleased to have some shelter at last, although Lyca was looking depressed and like she wanted to go back out there!



What a mess!

We could've kicked ourselves for not remembering to use the hand and foot warmers that were in a bag in the boot, they'd have come in very handy as our fingers were close to dropping off with frostbite. Straight after we got in the sun came out, which was pretty much typical of our luck. There was only one thing for it after that, I needed to go to Inchriach Nurseries to get some cake from The Potting Shed, the best cake shop in the world :). No pain, no gain :P. I was looking forward to my reward soooooo much but when we arrived my heart sank when I saw the sign outside saying that it was closed on Monday and Tuesday.....Nooooooooo! Not only that but we'd hoped to see some Red Squirrels from the viewing window at the back of the shop, so it was doubly disappointing. Clutching at straws I suggested going to Loch an Eileen to eat lunch by the feeders in the hope of seeing one or even a Crestie there. We had no other ideas so headed straight there preparing ourselves to pay for the privilege.

Approaching the entrance Wendy reached for her purse but we soon noticed that the hut was unmanned. It must be seasonal, so we didn't have to pay a penny :). I parked up by the very busy feeders but there were no Squirrels or Cresties to be seen, so we cracked open the lunch bag. Lyca was curled up on the back seat after her walk but soon moved herself when Wendy waved the raw carrot she'd packed for her under her nose. After lunch we killed some time by failing



miserably to get some shots of the copious amount of common birds that were around before leaving at 12.35pm.

Finding a Red Squirrel was proving frustratingly difficult and was becoming our hardest task of the trip, which having presumed we'd have them coming to our garden was quite depressing. It wasn't like we were asking for much but for us no trip to Scotland is complete without them! We certainly weren't struggling for our other Scottish favourite, Cresties, unlike the tour guide I'd met at Boat of Garten, so that was a bonus at least. Our only problem was getting a really decent shot of one and Wendy was still desperate to get one without it being on feeder. Driving down a road Wendy dropped another clanger when she announced, "Oooooo Finches!" and then, "Oooooo leaves!" Oh dear, it wasn't a flock of birds flying across the field at all :P. I'd seen a few walks in the Glenmore area but you had to go the Visitor Centre and pay £2 for a ticket to allow you to park in any of their car parks first. The Visitor Centre was also supposed to be good for Red Squirrels, so that was our next plan sorted.

I parked up in the car park at Glenmore Visitor Centre at 12.48pm and we headed up to get our ticket. We'd never been there before at all so I was interested to see what was in there. After paying our £2 Wendy couldn't resist the temptation of getting a cappuccino from the café, so I of course couldn't come away empty handed and chose a huge piece of Honeycomb Slice :). I then grabbed a handful of leaflets about the walks in the area and armed with our goodies we took it back to the car, where Lyca was eagerly awaiting our return. I had a gander through the leaflets and found a nice small loop walk just up the road. It was raining again so we weren't in a hurry but after we'd finished I drove up the road to Hayfields car park, so we could explore the new walk.

The 1<sup>st</sup> thing I noticed was that there were cars parked at the side of the road, just next to the car park and realized that I needn't have paid after all. The car park was full of Landrovers and we quickly realized that it was the Search and Rescue Dog Team!



Uh oh

There were some very obedient Border Collies in high viz coats standing with their trainers, waiting to go into the woods. This was a problem with Lyca being such an idiot and we decided that she couldn't be trusted and I drove off. Clutching at straws we thought it might be a good idea to check out the Crestie situation in a place we'd found them at a few years ago. After relocating the

layby we all bailed out of the car at 1.33pm and into the woods. There were loads of pinecones on the ground, so Lyca was having a great time chasing after the ones Wendy was throwing for her and drying out in the process. We walked all the way down the bank and to the river, where Lyca had a paddle and continued to play 'pinecone' but as we'd thought, there was no suggestion of any Cresties having returned yet.



Waiting for the next pinecone

At 1.52pm it was still early in the day when we got back to the car but it was blowing a gale and very cold, so we had no idea what to do next. We passed a group of cyclist being herded in by the obvious leader, who looked like a bit of a poser. We could only imagine he'd rounded them up to say, "Ok guys gather round." "Is this my best side?" as he angled his face, "Ok...Check!" "Let's go!" or maybe it was just boredom setting in? :). We carried on to Nethybridge, where we hoped to go for another walk in the woods between rain showers. We'd have loved to stay at Antighur again but unfortunately the owner had emailed me to say that they were selling up. This was a shame and another great place scrubbed off our list but we noted that it was Masson Cairns Estate Agents selling it, so we could have a nosey later. We wouldn't be able to find out how much it was on the market for though, as they don't advertise that in Scotland.

When we arrived at Nethybridge it was 2.23pm and had started to chuck it down, so we had no option but to wait for it to pass over. When the sun started to break through I wandered over to the map to take a pic of it on my phone, so we'd have a better idea as to where we were going this time.





Dell Woods info board

We set off at 2.47pm and wandered into the forest, which was nicely sheltered from the wind. This was a bonus but on the downside there didn't seem to be any sign of there being any birdlife at all! The walk seemed to take forever and the map was just confusing me rather than being helpful. Eventually we stumbled across the feeders near Steels Mill we'd been aiming for and stopped for a scan.



Feeders

Luckily there was a Crestie on the peanuts so we sat down on the bench and waited to see if it'd perch on a branch for us instead. After a while it flew up into a tree but it was behind a load of branches and when it did come out into the open it flew straight back to the feeders in the blink of an eye.....Aarrghhhh! A nice female **Bullfinch** came in to feed too and it was equally as annoying and impossible to get a shot of. We weren't having much luck but then all of a sudden the Crestie landed on top of a stone that had obviously been cunningly placed on top of the log feeder by a photographer. We both raised our cameras and fired off as many shots as humanly possible until it flew off.





Crested Tit

Looking back at our pics was disappointing to say the least, especially for Wendy, who'd become so rusty she'd panicked and had her camera on the wrong settings the whole time.....Doh! Luckily she took it on the chin and didn't seem that bothered.....Phew! We called it a day after that and seeing as it'd been too dark to get any proper decent shots anyway I reckoned an early morning visit would make for much better conditions as the sun would be behind us and hopefully breaking through the trees, so we knew we'd be back in the morning for round two.

Even with the map we'd skillfully managed to get lost not once but twice on the way back. Wendy was getting tired and just wanted to get back to the car, so when we hit a cross road in the path, which we couldn't work out she was annoyed. She reckoned we should go straight ahead but I was certain we needed to turn right. Generally the rule of thumb is to take the opposite route to what Wendy thinks, which usually works well, so I turned right. Usually that is until then, so I had to admit defeat and turned back to go her way....Grrrrr! Back at the cross road we let a bloke with a humungous Husky off the lead go past before we carried on and finally found ourselves on the riverside path, which would take us back to the car.



River Nethy

By then I'd worked out that if we'd carried on with my route we'd still have been OK but it would've made the walk just that little bit longer. The lack of birds we'd seen or heard on the way back was very disappointing and the riverside walk seemed equally as dead. Wendy was hanging back behind me and I wondered what she was doing. All of a sudden she shouted, "**Dipper!**" and had found one right at the far end sitting on a rock in the river. I don't know how she'd found it so far away but she said she'd just had a hunch. Nearer the bridge I found another, so I passed Lyca over to Wendy and headed down the bank to get some shots to make up for my non-productive day.



Dipper

Finally we were back at the car at 4.45pm and as soon as we got in, it started to rain so we'd timed it well again. Wendy wanted to go out for tea and we could see the Nethybridge Hotel, just a stone's throw away, up the road but didn't know if it was open to the public or dog friendly. Wendy suggested that she could go in and ask when we drove past, so I parked up outside. She got out and

disappeared through the door just as I noticed a huge sign on the wall next to me saying, 'Bar Food.' Wendy ventured into the main reception area and was greeted by a very friendly bloke, who told her that we could have food with a dog in the public bar but not in the main bar or reception. She thought she'd be clever and took a photo of the starters menu with her phone to show me. Next she turned the page to get one of the main courses only to find that her phone battery had just died.....Doh! She came back out saying that there was stuff for me and that we should give it a go when it opened at 6pm. We were starving, so were a bit disappointed that it didn't serve food earlier but I wanted to go back to HQ to get changed and take all the camera gear in anyway, as I don't like leaving it in the car unattended.

It was 5pm when we got back and the 1<sup>st</sup> thing I did was to get the camera trap in for a look. All the peanut butter had gone from under it, so I was very excited about finding out what had eaten it. Wendy cleverly put Lyca's tablet in with her dinner, which she wolfed down, so that was another thing sorted.....Phew! I sat down to check the day's footage and it wasn't what I'd been hoping for at all. First up we had a Robin, the next was a Coal Tit followed by Chaffinch, Blackbird, Wood Pigeon, a Rook, which turned out to be the peanut butter thief and last but not least was a Jackdaw. Ah well, that just backed up our evidence that there were no Red Squirrels coming to the garden....Boooooo :( After that anticlimax we got ready to go out to the Nethybridge Hotel, where we'd never been before.

We left at 6pm and when we arrived and entered the public bar the 5 barflies all turned round and stared at us. Lyca embarrassingly stood up on her back legs and started dancing, which raised an eyebrow or two. One of them commented and found it overly amusing that he thought the tiny white dots on Wendy's jacket was snow. She reckoned that judging by the look of him he'd had a thousand too many as opposed to just the one. We scuttled past them all trying not to be put off but when we sat down at the table Wendy quickly noticed that it was so low it'd be a struggle to eat off. She was concerned about how her back would take it initially but after she'd actually noticed our surroundings and bad smell she was even more put off. It was pretty grim in there compared to how nice the rest of the Hotel was and it felt more like the great unwashed isolation unit rather than somewhere you'd like to eat. Seconds later she said, "Come on let's go!" but I suggested getting a drink 1<sup>st</sup> as it seemed far more polite. Wendy was having none of it and couldn't see any sense in staying a moment longer. I just wanted to avoid being rude but when she stood up and started to walk back to the door I had no other option than to follow her.....Awkward!

Once we were back in the car even I had to admit that it was the right decision but now we had the problem of trying to think of somewhere else to go. The only other place we knew about that advertised itself by saying 'muddy boots and dogs welcome' was Glenmore Lodge but we'd never been there before either and had no idea what was on the menu. It was either that or the Old Bridge Inn, which had a really poncy menu and nothing for me. We were starving by then, so we decided to take a risk and try to find Glenmore Lodge. The road there was narrow and winding and coupled with the now strong wind, heavy rain and it being pitch dark progress was slow. It seemed to take forever to get to the Visitor Centre and we had our eyes peeled for a sign to the Lodge. It was beginning to look as though we'd gone too far and I was thinking about turning round when all of a sudden the sign appeared in the headlights. I turned up a narrow and steep track and drove up a hill but it still didn't look right. What kind of restaurant situates itself in such an out of the way place? We arrived at what looked like an Outdoor Centre crossed with a school and an office block, which had a sign saying Glenmore Lodge written in plain English on the side.



It didn't look right at all but I drove into the car park round the back and Wendy spotted that upstairs looked like it was bar. Was this really it? Wendy said she's go and check it out 1<sup>st</sup> and had to fight against the wind to open the car door. When she got to the door there was a sign with an arrow pointing upstairs to the restaurant, so she gestured over to me that it was OK to go in. I got Lyca and tentatively went inside, still ½ not believing we were going to be staying. Upstairs we entered a modern bar area with tables set out for eating and a bigger area, which was much quieter. We had a quick look at the menu on one of the tables by the door and there was something for us both, so it looked as though we were staying. Obviously I wanted to go out the back, so I grabbed a table in the corner while Wendy got some drinks in and Lyca curled up on the floor by my legs. The wind was whistling through the rafters around us and it still felt more like the refectory of an Outdoors Training Centre and not the traditional Scottish pub with the cosy log fire we'd hoped Glenmore Lodge would be.



It even had a Tartan carpet!

While we were waiting for our food a group of 5 young student types came in and sat down nearby with drinks. It sounded like they were at Uni doing some kind of Environmental studies and spending time up in Scotland as part of their course. They must've had a hard day, as when their huge plates of food arrived they tucked in as though they hadn't eaten for weeks. The conversation was suitable studenty as they quizzed each other about Latin names of Mountain Hares and Snow Buntings, etc. There was one lad who was, shall we say the best of a bad bunch, and obviously the object of all the girl's desires. Everything he said provoked the most over the top laughter you could imagine, which kept us amused because he really wasn't that funny :P. When the barman brought our food over Lyca, who up until then had been well behaved, leapt out from under the table and went for his ankles! We were so embarrassed and apologised profusely for not only her behaviour but for giving him the shock of his life! Grrrrrr! He was OK about it but slightly more wary when he came back the 2<sup>nd</sup> time. My burger was really nice after I'd pulled all the rabbit food out of the bun and Wendy's soup of the day was a strange but pleasant sweetcorn concoction. She'd ordered chips to go with it but wasn't expecting the overwhelmingly large chip mountain that was put down in front of her. To say we both struggled would be an understatement and there was absolutely no room for pudding but Glenmore Lodge definitely offered value for money. I suppose that's what people who go there are looking for after a long day doing outdoor pursuits in the freezing cold Scottish Highlands.

We weren't looking forward to going back to the car in the gale force wind but were starting to feel pretty tired by then. I stopped off at Tesco in Aveimore and Wendy ran in to get bread for the next day, as we'd skillfully forgotten all about it earlier. It was 8.15pm when we got back to HQ and after we'd had baths we finally sat down to chill out. I went through all the day's photos and we listened to the wind howling outside. I wasn't looking forward to taking Lyca out for wee but after braving the awful weather we were done for and ready for bed at 10.30pm.

Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> March

When we woke up at 7am we were pleasantly surprised to find that the wind had finally dropped and it was a nice day. It was still a bit stronger than we'd expected, which could possibly throw a spanner in the day's plan. As it was forecasting the best weather of the week we thought we'd take the opportunity to do the Cairngorm walk for Ptarmigan. If it was going to be windy then neither of us fancied it much but we crossed our fingers that it'd be OK. While Wendy was out in the kitchen making sarnies something caught my eye under the feeder in the garden. I shouted to her, "Mouse!" and she dropped what she was doing and rushed in to have a look. I grabbed my bins and saw that it was a tiny little **Bank Vole** and reached for my camera. As I did it shot back into the hole it'd appeared from, so I waited for it to come back out. I sat for ages but it'd well and truly gone :( By 8.47am we were ready to go and our 1<sup>st</sup> stop was the Nethybridge feeders to try and make up for the mess we'd made of yesterdays photos.

This time, I parked nearer to where we wanted to be, so we didn't have such a hike to get there. In no time at all we were there but there were no birds to seen and it was dead.



Nethybridge feeders again

The peanuts had all but gone, so no wonder it was so quiet but we decided to give it 10 minutes and sat down on the bench again. After a while Wendy heard a Crestie calling from behind us and eventually it flew in and started feeding. When it flew up onto a branch we both started firing off some shots but Wendy had a problem. Her camera battery had just died BUT I'd put a fully charged one into it before we'd gone out :O! Uh oh, this wasn't good but she just put it down and said, "Oh well forget that then." All I could think was that that battery was



dead and would have to be binned and seeing as I'm so nice I offered to go and get my 7D for her to use. She didn't want to spoil my chances of getting a shot and told me not to bother but I was having none of it. I rushed off back to car leaving Wendy and Lyca on the bench and drove back to HQ. While I was gone the Crestie only came back briefly a couple of times but a Great Spotted Woodpecker put in an appearance to keep her occupied.

I grabbed my 7D from my camera bag and got back as quickly as I could but Wendy was looking puzzled as to how I'd been so long. She'd thought my 7D was in the car just round the corner and had no idea that I'd had to drive back to get it. There was no time to worry about that though when we heard a strange call, which sounded like a raptor overhead. When we looked up we saw the bird displaying over the forest and thought, "Eh up that's a massive Sparrowhawk?" Its call was slightly odd and the bird was pretty hefty. When it banked I caught a glimpse of a white patch on its rump too, so we checked Wendy's Birdguides app and things were looking pretty good for **Goshawk**! We even played the calls to compare the 2 and even that sounded spot on.....Woo Hoo! :). After that bit of unexpected excitement, plus hearing **Crossbill** flying over, we got back to the job in hand but typically the Crestie was nowhere to be seen :( We'd started to get bored and cold by then but all of a sudden Wendy spotted a **Red Squirrel** making its way through the trees in our direction. Finally! It was hidden behind a branch for ages but eventually came out into the open to clean itself and even have a bit of a nap enabling us to get some shots. All too soon it sprung back to life and was gone but we were just happy to have finally caught up with a Red Squirrel after our fruitless start to the week.



Red Squirrel

Fortunately the Crestie came back so we had a pop at that too but all the action had kicked off so quickly that when we checked our pics Wendy found that all hers were dark! Yet again she hadn't checked the settings on my 7D and presumed that I'd already done it ...Ooops! Surely we wouldn't find another Squirrel or Crestie close enough at this late stage in the game so that she could try again? This was the best Crestie shot I came out with after all our efforts.





Crested Tit

The female Bullfinch was back again but it was still sticking to the feeders, which were in the shade, so again we didn't get any shots of that. By then Wendy's fingers were so cold they hurt and she was hopping from foot to foot desperate for a wee, so we called it a day but it'd been an exciting start to the day for a change. As we were passing anyway I stopped off at HQ so Wendy could run in and use the loo and we both thought that changing into our super warm socks would be a good idea after our experience earlier. While we were there we dug out the heat pads and Wendy, not wanting to end up with chilblains grabbed some foot warmers and stuffed them into her socks. That was the only pair we had so I'd have to make do with just hand warmers, as we still had plenty. We were now fully prepared for our next plan apart from upping our calorie intake to keep us going. Our next stop was the Boat of Garten shop to sort that out and to also get some fresh baps so I could finally have my square sausage for tea. Wendy went in and came back with everything we needed and I drove to the car park by the feeders to share a croissant and pain au chocolat.....om nom nom :). We had a look at the flood field over the road and found the Iceland Gull, which lifted and flew off instantly. With our rocket fuel in our bellies we bit the bullet and headed off towards the Cairngorm National Park and re-found it in another field further along. It was a shame there was nowhere to stop at the side of the road because it was close enough for a decent shot.

With the snow gates having been closed the day before we had no idea what we were in for as we started to climb up towards Cairngorm but there didn't seem to be much snow about at all. I stopped at Coir na Ciste where the RSPB have built a new viewing platform for Black Grouse. When we got there we got out of the car for a scan but reckoned that the Grouse would be so far away they wouldn't be worth looking at anyway.



Coir na Ciste

There was no sign of any from what we could gather but the Mountain Rescue Team was out with their Dogs again over on the other side. They'd dug holes in the sides of the mountain and it looked like they were getting the Dogs to find people hiding inside them. Rather than us!



It was 11.55am when we arrived at the Cairngorm car park and it was snowing. The car park was heaving and it looked like there were plenty of skiers around despite the apparent lack of snow.





Cairngorm car park

The runs themselves still had plenty on them and we could see the skiers and snowboarders sliding down them so high up they looked like tiny ants. Our 1<sup>st</sup> plan was to go to the shop to get me a Buff in preparation after I'd seen how well Wendy's worked earlier and to hopefully find the Snow Buntings that hang round the car park. We hadn't so much as heard one by the time we got to the shop and after picking a Buff I liked we went to the café, which had moved since we'd been there last year. It used to be downstairs in the shop but that had gone, so we had to go upstairs to the main café. Wendy got a cappuccino to warm herself up and we back to Lyca in the car and decided to eat our lunch before setting off. We didn't fancy running out of steam ½ way up and it would be much later when we got back, so it made sense. We kept our eyes peeled for the Snow Buntings but they were nowhere to be seen and after lunch we were ready to go. I was laden down with both cameras as well as the rucksack, which had our water in it, so it was going to be hard going for me. Wendy's back was feeling dodgy, so if she felt like she couldn't go any further we decided we'd stop and abandon ship. Hopefully this wouldn't happen though and we set off with our fingers crossed at 12.56pm.



Crossing the bridge at the bottom of the ski runs



I'd decided to do the walk we did 3 years ago when we'd been there during the March heat wave and had a pair of Ptarmigan right next to us. This was a relatively easy Cairngorm walk and a reliable spot for sightings, so I was feeling quite optimistic. Approaching the ski lift was tricky, as the snow had become very compacted and slippery from all the skiers. I could just image myself falling over but we managed it without any accidents and it soon cleared. The path was just a bit wet so it was plain sailing for a while as we steadily ascended.



Onwards and upwards

There were loads of Red Grouse calling and flying around, which Lyca was very interested in. If she hadn't have been on her lead she'd have been off chasing them! Further up the path it became more rocky and icy but at least we were nice and warm with our hand warmers in our gloves. There were sections still under some deep compacted snow in between though, which were really slippery and we skirted around any holes we could see in it.



Slippery!

I was up ahead with Lyca and had nearly cleared one section when all of a sudden I heard Wendy squeak behind me. I turned around to see her standing laughing with one leg buried up to her knee! She pulled it out, uncovering a deep hole, so we presumed that all the other holes had also been made in the same

way. With the sun out it wasn't half as cold as we'd expected and Wendy said she felt like her feet were going to catch fire with her foot warmers in her boots. She even had to unzip her coat, which turned out to be short lived, when it went behind the clouds again.

It was difficult to get our bearings with everywhere looking so different since we'd last been there but we reckoned we'd finally hit the spot where we'd had the Ptarmigan last time. There were Red Grouse all around us and Wendy spotted one hunkering down as we went past, so we stopped for a pic just as it started to pose nicely.



Red Grouse

We were slightly worried that the Ptarmigan would be much further up the mountain with it being so mild but looking higher up it looked as though we wouldn't be able to go much further. The snow was much deeper on the steepest section and we already knew how hard it was to walk on, so when I heard a weird call my ears pricked up. I looked up the path ahead of me and was very surprised when a practically all white **Ptarmigan** came into my view :O! I called it to Wendy, who was totally shocked at the find. We weren't expecting it at all since there were Red Grouse at this altitude and after watching it we realized that we had limited time if wanted to get a shot, as there were people coming down that would almost certainly flush the bird. We got our cameras and fired off some shots but it was too far away for anything really decent, so we edged our way cautiously nearer. It was still miles off but the walkers were getting dangerously close and the bird started to become twitchy.





Ptarmigan

Unfortunately the walkers flushed it so it flew and carried on until it landed much further up the mountain on the section we'd already decided we couldn't do :( . Not to be outdone I reckoned we should go for it, I wanted a better pic of that bird and wasn't at all happy with what I already had. The path had turned into stepping stones in the snow and although at the start it was OK when we got a bit higher up the rocks became more icy and very slippery. Wendy decided that she wasn't going any further but I was adamant I wasn't giving up and carried on without her. Just a few stones up with Lyca pulling on the lead, the wind picking up and the weight of the cameras I realized that it was a total no go zone and had to, with reluctance, give up too :( . That Ptarmigan was sitting in the snow somewhere just waiting for someone to get its mug shot but it certainly wasn't going to be me! Boooooo :( . Ah well, at least we'd got one of things we went there for and got some distant shots of it, so we couldn't complain :). Wendy sat down at the Ptarmigan spot to have a drink and to scribble some notes, so I checked my phone app to see how high up it'd been. We'd had it at 2,646feet and now we didn't need to go any higher.....Phew! Lyca also took some time out and we reckoned she'd be a tired dog later :).





As we came down the mountain we noticed that the icy puddles had all melted in the heat of the sun and it was really warm again. Down at the bottom Wendy stopped to watch the skiers and couldn't believe how easy they made it look.



Ski runs

I carried on back to the car and left her to it, I desperately needed to get my coat off, as I was way too hot and to relieve my shoulders of the weight of the cameras. It was 3.10pm when we got back to the car and the walk had been totally worth it. Nearby was the most ridiculously lowered car we'd ever seen and it looked so stupid we couldn't resist taking a photo of it :P.



Hahahaha!

There was still no sign of the Snow Buntings, which was disappointing but Wendy reckoned we needed to go the Old Bridge Inn in Aviemore for a celebratory drink and to check out the menu again. I really didn't want to but it was dog friendly and we needed to find somewhere else to go out for food so I agreed.

We pulled up outside the pub at 3.55pm as the car park we'd normally use had been completely flooded by the river.





The car park!

We went inside and Lyca instantly got up on her back legs and started dancing to 'Play that Funky Music' by Wild Cherry! Trying not to laugh Wendy got some drinks in while I scuttled off and found a table in a dark corner to calm Lyca down. Wendy asked for a menu to look at but it hadn't changed and was far too poncy for me. It looks like the Chef knows what he's doing though but it's just a pub not a fancy restaurant! I asked for the wi-fi code and we both caught up with our emails and facebook having not been able to since we'd left the Isle of Man. After a while we started to laugh when we realized that we were both sitting at a table together with our heads down, totally engrossed in our phones. We'd hardly muttered a single word to each other since we'd been there, which when we see other people doing it makes us wonder why they bother to leave their houses in the 1<sup>st</sup> place :P. When the door opened and some people came in with a black Labrador and Border Collie Lyca jumped up and started barking at them totally ruining her spell of good behavior. She soon settled back down on the floor and we continued to be antisocial until we'd finished our drinks and had caught up with everything on our phones :P.

When we got back to the car we were tired and the only thing we wanted to do was head for home to chill out. We were back at HQ by 4.56pm and I knew what I was having for tea, square sausage baps!



Yum yum :)

Wendy set about frying it up and was disgusted as to how much fat came out of it! Luckily she'd got the fresh baps that morning and there were some sachets of tomato sauce in the car so I was very happy :). She also made use of the copious amount of fat by soaking bread in it and not only did it clean the pan nicely but it would provide a high calorie meal for the birds. Lyca was absolutely knackered all evening and as it was so chilly Wendy suggested lighting the fire. Within minutes we had a roaring fire going but instead of curling up in front of it, Lyca looked anything but impressed and ran off to hide behind the settee! She likes her cool spots and up until then had been using the tiled hearth, so she'd had to find another cold place to settle down. Like a proper pair of old farts we packed up and headed off to bed at 10pm and again went out like lights.....ZZZZZZZZZZ.

Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> March

After a well-earned sleep we were awake at 6.42 to find a sunny day but it was still quite gusty. Lyca went out and then spent a while barking at the Woodpecker, which was drumming like crazy in the woods. All the peanuts had gone from the garden but there was still nothing interesting on the trap camera. The forecast was for rain, so this was the day we'd chosen to drive the 2 and a bit hours to Aberdeen to try our luck with the Harlequin Duck that had been hanging around the river Don in Seaton Park. It had been there for at least 2 months but then disappeared a week before our holiday only to be found again 2 days ago. It was a big risk and we couldn't help but worry that today would be the day when it cleared off but it had been seen yesterday and the forecast was bad for the whole day, so we decided to have a bit of an adventure into a big city. I've always wanted to see a Harlequin Duck and after missing out on the one in the Hebs I was even more certain that it'd be worth a shot. We wanted to get going as quickly as possible, so Wendy made the sarnies and packed our lunch bag and then went to get dressed and do her teeth. I told her I'd pack the car up while she was doing everything else and at 8.15am we locked up and headed out.....sorted! The nice early start would hopefully mean we'd get to Seaton Park at a good time for sightings of the Duck but I wasn't exactly looking forward to driving in a big unknown City. I'd put it in my Sat Nav avoiding the City Centre, so hopefully it'd get us there without having a mental breakdown.

As we joined the main road we saw 2x Kestrels out hunting over the fields but there was nothing else of note. When we got as far as the Glenlivet Estate in



Moray the fields on the Malt Whiskey Trail were covered in Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatchers. At 8.44am we'd hit Tomintoul, where we were hoping to see Black Grouse but it was blowing a gale and there were no laybys to stop in for a look anyway! From what we could see there wasn't any sign of them, so we just had to drive straight through and leave empty handed :( Wendy noticed that Lyca was panting heavily in the back seat, so she turned around to get her some water from her bottle. Lyca's bottle wasn't in its usual place, so she asked me if I could get the lunch bag from the footwell behind her seat. She couldn't see it behind me and presumed it was hidden behind her, so she wouldn't be able to reach it. I pulled over and turned around to find that it wasn't there either :O! Uh oh! There'd been a slight misunderstanding when I'd said that I'd packed everything into the car before leaving. Everything that was except for the lunch, which was usually Wendy's job :/. There were a few expletives exchanged over the next few minutes and lots of blame handed about but the fact of the matter was that we'd gone too far to go back to HQ and pick it up, so we'd have to pick something up on our travels.....Urrghhhh! Driving past the Lecht Ski Resort was a bit different from last time. There was no snow around apart from on the slopes and the skiers that had previously been on the slopes had been replaced by Red Grouse walking around!



Lecht

After dropping down off the hills I was very interested as we crossed a bridge that said River Don. I realized that it was the river that runs into Aberdeen and the same river that the duck was on. After checking on my Sat Nav we were still 54 miles from Aberdeen and I know it isn't exactly Amazon lengths but for someone from the Isle of Man this blew my mind :). After Wendy spotted a Spa as I drove through Strathdon she got me to pull up, so she could go in and get Lyca some water. She'd found nothing else apart from drinks but she'd been right in thinking that Lyca was thirsty, as she guzzled her water in no time. There was no time to hang around though and as soon as she'd finished and had a refill we set off again. The scenic landscape we were used to soon changed into a more boring view of flat fields with no hedges, which were being used to graze sheep and grow crops. We were still following the river Don and Wendy spotted the white blob of another male Goosander, sticking out like a sore thumb.



River Don

The winding road was only narrow, so when we got stuck behind a tractor it slowed us down to the pace of a snail. Luckily I found a suitable overtaking spot quickly and we whizzed past just as 2x **Golden Plover** flew over the road. There were hundreds of **Common Gulls** in the fields too but Wendy was now in need of a WC break typically when we were stuck in the middle of nowhere again! There was nowhere to stop for miles and farm buildings dotted around everywhere but eventually we found a suitable layby. We hadn't passed any other cars, so she was confident that she'd be OK and jumped out. Just as she was about to stand up, after the longest wee ever, a car came round the corner and sent her into a fit of giggles. She couldn't move for laughing and clung to the side of the car to stop herself from falling over straight into the huge puddle she'd just created :O! Oh dear.....hahahahaha! Whichever way she looked at it there was no doubt in my mind that she'd just been caught in the act....Oooops! After she'd managed to recompose herself she got back in and we carried on towards the big City passing a field with a huge flock of Whooper Swans.

Eventually we hit the huge roundabout with our junction for Aberdeen and didn't fancy turning off for a day in 'Lower Boghead' much. It might be a lovely place for all we know but its name didn't really do it any favours! There was yet another male Goosander on the river as we drove over the Bridge of Don and followed the signs for Peterhead. Luckily Seaton Park wasn't far away and at 10.34am I parked up in the car park.

We had no idea what to expect of Seaton Park and on 1<sup>st</sup> glances it looked quite run down but it was huge, so we crossed our fingers. There were dog walkers everywhere, so we'd have to keep Lyca under control too just to add to the stress. We got our stuff together and set off in the direction I'd seen on Birdguides. All of a sudden the place didn't seem so bad when we got to a tree-lined path with a fountain and topiary bushes all along it, which lead to a grand looking hall, which seemed to be a student highway. It was a relief that we weren't in a total grot hole and we could start to relax a bit.





Oooooo very nice

I instantly thought the worst when 3x depressed looking birders appeared from round a corner heading back towards the car park. Wendy quickly reminded me that most Birders look depressed anyway and when they were nearer she asked them if they'd had any joy. Having not held much hope up until then we were very pleased to hear that they had. The bird had moved from where it'd been yesterday and we were heading in the wrong direction so it was a good job she'd stopped them. They were going back to their car to drive to somewhere nearer where it was showing. We thanked them and scuttled off following their directions and found 3 more Birders further up the path sitting at picnic table with scopes and bins looking up the river.



Birders!

This looked promising and we edged our way over and had a scan up the river. There was no sign, so not wanting to follow a false lead Wendy asked them if they'd seen it. Apparently and totally typical of our luck it'd been showing right at the top on the left, where the river turned a corner, up until 1 minute ago but hadn't been seen since.....Aaarrghhhh!





Miles away!

We stood there scanning and scanning every inch of water, rock and bank until Wendy spotted some Goosanders on the right. I had a look for want of something better to do just as the bloke with the scope announced that he'd re-found it.....with the Goosanders! Wendy could just about make a tiny black blob but it was so far away she asked the bloke if she could have a look through his scope, as it was impossible with just bins. He was very obliging and let us both have a look but after wanting to see a **Harlequin Duck** for soooooo long I wasn't happy with the view at all. I asked him if there was any way of getting up the river to where it was, as there was some construction work going on and the path was blocked off by some huge metal barriers. He said it was very complicated but doable and gave us directions of how to get there by climbing the bank and walking through the estate. If that's what it was going to take then we were up for it, so we thanked him and set off expecting it to be really difficult to find our way. In reality it was easy peasy and after we'd got up the bank we found outside walking through the car park of some apartment blocks. The graffiti on the wall was pretty choice and made us wonder where on earth we were but it seems no holiday is complete without us paying a total grot hole a visit somewhere along the line.



Hmmmmmm?



When we came out of the car park we walked down a road past some council houses and then down another steep bank strewn with litter that I reckoned would take us back to the river. Wendy made the point of telling me to watch where we stood, as just to put me at ease, she reckoned it looked good for used needles! Our efforts paid off though when we amazingly emerged back onto the river path directly opposite where the Harlequin Duck was. Skillzzz :). We could see the Goosanders we'd been watching from afar earlier and the Harlequin Duck, our 1<sup>st</sup> lifer of the trip, was sitting on a rock next to them. Walking through Grottsville had definitely been well worth it and we were now able to get amazing views of the bird although it was going to be tricky to get a decent shot through the wire fencing. We held our cameras up and fired some off through the fence but it wasn't long before I got sick of that and reckoned that I could safely get nearer. Wendy kept hold of Lyca while I swung myself round the barrier and over the riverbank. I was now back on the footpath so I found a suitable spot and sat down. I looked back at Wendy, who was still stuck on the other side trying to shoot through the fence and she didn't look happy. It wasn't helping that her back was sore but to top it off it was really windy too, so she was really struggling to hold her camera steady. She wasn't happy with any of her shots, the bird was still too far for her camera to cope with and coupled with the wind it just wasn't happening. After shooting a lot of shots and realizing the bird was still just a bit too far away for anything great I decided I'd just have to be content with what I had got.



Harlequin Duck

I had a quick chimp to see if had any decent ones but when I looked back up the bird had disappeared....Eh? I grabbed a quick shot of a nearby Goosander then went and asked Wendy where the duck had gone.



Goosander

Wendy said that it'd jumped into the river and completely vanished but it wasn't long before she re-found sitting behind one of Goosanders with some grass and a rock between them....Urrghhhh! This was where it stayed for the next 15 minutes or so and although I really wanted to wait around to better my existing shots the bird seemed quite happy where it was. Wendy fired off some shots of a Goosander for a bit of amusement when you consider there's a Harlequin Duck tucked in behind one of them!



Spot the duck

We decided to call it a day just before the 3 Birders we'd met on the way into the Park rolled up. It'd taken them all that time to get back to their car and find it, which made my navigation skillzz look all the more better :D. Another bloke was next, so Wendy showed them all where it was hiding before we wished them luck and said, "Goodbye." We wandered back through the council estate and wondered what on earth we were going to do for lunch.





Scenic!

Wendy had been calling out all the cafes and sarnie shops on the way into the Town Centre but I didn't like the look of the area and there was no way I was stopping there! The guy with the scope who'd showed us where the bird was earlier was still there with his wife when we came down the bank, so we stopped for a chat. There was another couple talking to them too and the woman made a huge fuss of Lyca and admired her. She said she'd had 2x Otters and a Dipper further down the river and scope guy's wife said she'd also seen an Otter!! That wouldn't be a bad days work at all seeing Harlequin Duck and Otter on the same stretch of river! The other couple left and we carried on chatting about how they'd been to see the Penduline Tit in Dorset before travelling up to Aberdeen for the Duck. We didn't fancy their journey much but couldn't help but feel envious of them having seen such a great bird. The guy asked us where we'd come from and when we said the Isle of Man he said something that made us laugh. "Ah, do you know Ted?" Now that's a question we've been asked many times before but not for a while, so we'd been there before. We told him we did and then joked about how everyone seems to know Ted wherever we go. He said that he was from the Wirral, like Ted and that he still phones him for a catch up from time to time. It really is a small world! They were good company but we eventually said our goodbyes and headed off down the footpath hoping to catch up with an Otter or two.

The sun had come out by then and the temperature had risen considerably, so the clothing we were in was a bit too much. We walked as far as we could go without seeing anything but we couldn't complain.



Riverside walk

We'd just seen a Harlequin Duck, which was a lifer for us both and Lyca had been for a much longer walk than we'd expected. It'd also been a surprisingly pleasant walk too, if you took out the council house section with the litter strewn bank. We were back at the car by 12.21pm and after we'd all had a drink we reckoned it was lunchtime. Now I'd done a bit of research and found that it would only take about 25 minutes to drive north up the north east coast to Ythun Estuary. The 'Best Birdwatching Sites' guide book reckoned there was a reserve there called Forvie NNR, which had a Visitor Centre and café, so that was where I reckoned we should go for lunch. We could also have a look at the estuary itself while we were there, as I'd seen the place mentioned many times before on Birdguides. We could do with adding some new birds to the trip list and it would be a totally different set of birds to those we'd seen up in the Highlands. Clever me :P!

With rumbling stomachs we left at 12.38pm and we'd timed it well again, as the weather started to take a turn for the worse. We knew the forecast was bad but had been lucky up until then but looking up the coast to where we were going next it looked like it was set to stay. Heading up the coast we drove over the bridge of an estuary seeing some **Eiders** but we could see squalls out to sea and the wind had started to pick right up.....Urrghhhh! It was 1pm when we finally arrived at Forvie after being slightly dubious that there'd even be a Visitor Centre in such a remote part of the world. We weren't entirely sure that the Sat Nav was even taking us to the right place but it got us there in the end. Wendy looked at the tiny little hut that stood before us in the middle of no man's land and wasn't convinced in the slightest. I parked up and she said she'd go for a look anyway because she was so hungry.





Is that it?

The wind was so strong that she could hardly open the car door and she wasn't looking forward to getting out in the driving rain either. She didn't look best pleased or surprised when she got to the entrance and found the place locked up and in total darkness, so she battled her way back with a face that said it all. Now what? I'd planned it to perfection so we could have some lunch from the nice café we'd pictured in our heads but even if the Visitor Centre had been open we couldn't see that there'd be any room inside for one! It was so horrible outside that we couldn't even get out for a look at the estuary, so we had no choice but to leave. We were hoping to find a shop on our travels so we could at least have a packet of crisps to tide us over but it was so uninhabited we weren't hopeful. When we saw a sign for Colliston I headed straight there still hoping to find a shop. When we got there we found what looked like a tiny fishing village consisting of about 7 houses at the top of a steep hill to the harbour.



Nice day for a swim

The wind was gusting and the waves were crashing over the jetty, so we decided not drive down there for a photo. The rain was lashing down, so we don't know if it was just bad timing or not but to live there looked like it'd be hell on earth. The gardens of the houses were covered in sea foam and of course there wasn't a single shop in sight! We couldn't get away quick enough and carried on our

search for a shop to get something edible from. We could've turned off and tried 'Rude Bay' but thought better of it and surely nobody in their right mind would be at the bay being rude in that kind of weather anyway! A bit further on Wendy saw another sign for Cruden Bay, so was disappointed that Rude Bay didn't even exist and that some joker had just tampered with the 1<sup>st</sup> sign....Boooooo :). All of a sudden I lost my GPS signal presumably because of the bad weather, which wasn't what I needed at all. I had no idea where we were and didn't fancy getting lost in it, wherever it was. Luckily my GPS came back quickly and we were back on track although we'd ditched off getting anything to eat for a while.

We'd both started to feel a bit ropery by the time we found the town of Ellon, so I drove in. Straight away we found a Tesco and instantly thought, "Food!" so I parked up in the car park. We left Lyca in the car and hurried our way straight to the sandwich aisle and although Wendy had said she'd eat anything by then, she ended up eating her words when she realized that there were no veggie sarnies apart from egg. She absolutely hates egg, so came away empty handed, as did I. Next we tried the bakery section but all there was were cold pastries and bread, so Wendy out of sheer desperation got a Mediterranean vegetable square but I still hadn't had any luck. We picked up some smoothies, crisps and a bag of cookies and I went back to the hot pie cabinet and grabbed a Chicken Piri-Piri pasty....sorted.....ish! Wendy was on the last page of her notepad too, so she grabbed a new one before we left to finally go and eat something. Back at the car we got the edibles out of the bag and started tucking in. Rather than being edible Wendy's pastry was anything but, so Lyca did well out of it while Wendy went back to plan A and opened a packet crisps! Mine went down a treat but then again I do like eating total junk :). While we sat there we chuckled at the people going to do their shopping, who were getting blown to bits by the wind as they walked through the car park :P. Ellon was another new place for us but it looked like one of those places, which was a bit out of the way and always windy, so neither of us could see it as being somewhere we'd like to live. The locals must be hard as nails though, as we'd seen loads of people walking around in shorts :O! We didn't fancy staying there any longer than we needed to either, so after we'd had a cookie we were back on the road and heading back to the Highlands. Another weird place we drove through, which was nearby, was Old Meldrum and yet again there were a few pairs of shorts being worn around the place. We were still in full on winter gear and with that wind we'd have been freezing in anything else.

By 2.30pm it had started to brighten up again and when we drove through Keith Wendy spotted an 'Original Factory Shop' and got me to stop, so she could go in. She was sick of waking up freezing cold in the night because Lyca was nicking her covers and was on the hunt for a cheap fleece throw. We wandered round but although it had just about every random item you could think of, there were no throws. Just after Keith we passed a field being ploughed and my eyes were instantly drawn to a very white looking Gull and I laughed and called out, "Iceland Gull!" It was quite close to the road too, so I slammed on the brakes and reversed up the road, stopping on some white lines.....tut tut. I grabbed my camera from the boot for a record shot but the bird flew off with the rest of the flock and landed right at the top of the field miles away.....Dammit!





Iceland Gull

I was on fire though, finding a drive by Iceland Gull was pretty impressive, even if I do say myself :P. A bit further on my skills took a nosedive when I called out a Pigeon but it turned out to be a Buzzard! That was more on a level with Wendy's classic bloopers but didn't come close to my all time favourite of her Kangaroo in the Highlands. We followed the Whiskey Trail all the way back and let out a cheer at 3.59pm when we saw the sign telling us we were back in the Cairngorms National Park.....Yey!

It'd been a long but eventful day, so we decided to head straight back to HQ to chill out and were back at 4.17pm. We'd definitely chosen the perfect day to go to Aberdeen though and judging by the wet roads it looked like it'd rained for most of the day locally.....Skillz :). Lyca was very hungry and so were we, so Wendy set about making tea while I went through the day's photos. She was just heating some soup up in the microwave for herself but instead of the doing the same with my beans and sausages she did it the proper way and used a pan. Although they stick like glue and make a right mess you just can't beat heating them up in a pan and I was very impressed. When she brought hers in I asked her how she was getting on with the gadget I'd bought for microwaves. It was a plastic tray with handles that saves you from burning your fingers when you take hot things out and it worked a treat, so I wasn't expecting what she said in reply at all. She complained that the bowl was nearly touching the roof, as the tray was too high because the legs were so long and that you still burn your fingers when you take the bowl out. EH? I couldn't help but crack up laughing when I realized that she'd been using it upside down! The legs were actually the handles to lift it out with, so you don't touch the hot item and the tray sits on the bottom! Oh dear, she'd been using it like that twice a day for the past 3 days and hadn't clicked yet either....Doh! After we'd both laughed at how totally stupid she was we carried on eating our tea but deary me, there's no hope! Lyca seemed adequately pooped and slept for most of the evening well away from the roaring fire. We realized that it would be our last day tomorrow and we hadn't even attempted an early start to try for Capercaillie yet, so we decided that we'd give Forest Lodge a shot in the morning. We were knackered by 10pm and with an early start planned we packed up for the night and went to bed. Wendy nicked another quilt from one of the spare bedrooms, so that when Lyca sidled up to her in the night she didn't end up without any covers again.

Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> March

We were awake at 6.40am but it was freezing and we were feeling anything but spritely, so lay in till 6.55am. It was a cold start to the day and although it wasn't forecast it was blowing a gale outside.....Grrrrrrrrr! The wind forecast had been wrong every day so far but we really didn't need it to be strong today. I let Lyca out for a wee and got the camera trap in but found nothing but Rooks on it. When we were all ready and Wendy had made lunch and a concerted effort to make sure it came out with us this time we headed out at 8.20am. It wasn't as early as we'd have liked but we just couldn't find the enthusiasm to get up at silly o'clock.

Luckily by the time we got to Forest Lodge at 8.32am the wind seemed to have eased off and the sun had come out. As I reckoned we were already too late for Caper I suggested taking a different route to the one we'd normally take, just to mix things up for a change and try to see a new area. This walk was in the opposite direction and incorporated a ford, which we'd have to cross. Wendy instantly pointed out the fact that every river we'd seen so far was flooded because of the snowmelt and she couldn't see that we'd be able to get across it. Although she did have a point I decided to throw caution to the wind and to give it a shot anyway in the hope that she was wrong.

Firstly we walked through the section of forest that would be closed in a few weeks due to Caper activity but we of course saw nothing, as usual.



Abernethy Forest

We then turned left and started to walk uphill, which went on forever and had very little life in it. Wendy 'kindly' pointed out that it looked useless for Caper and that we should've just done our usual walk instead....Urrghhhh! When we got to the top of the hill there was a fork in the path and checking my phone map app I saw that we needed to go left and down the hill to the ford. Wendy didn't look happy and couldn't stop herself from telling me that if the ford was flooded, as she predicted, we'd have to walk all the way back up the hill again. Reluctantly she followed me down but when we got the bottom her face fell. The river was really high and there was no way we were getting over it unless we were prepared to paddle through waist high water or shimmy across a fallen tree with me carrying Lyca and my camera.





Urrghhhh!

Of course Wendy gleefully reminded me that she'd told me so etc. etc. but the fact of the matter was that there was only way we could go and that was straight back up the hill. Instead of backtracking on ourselves when we got to the fork at the top we took the right hand path instead. Even though it was March and on 1<sup>st</sup> glances the landscape still looked lifeless Wendy pointed out that there was some signs of spring beginning. The branches of the trees had started to take on a kind of purple glow at their extremities. Although there is still no actual structure there it creates a purple haze so you can no longer see straight through the branches and it added a welcome splash of colour. She always describes it as being like blood returning to their veins, which have been lying dormant over the long winter but that's way too hippy for me :P.



Signs of spring

After her poetic outburst we carried on up the hill to where we'd got lost the 1<sup>st</sup> time we'd ever been to Scotland and through the gate where I'd found a Cuckoo.





Cuckoo gate

Obviously there was no Cuckoo but at least we knew where were going and didn't get lost this time. It was really windy on top of the hill, the sky had turned rather black and it had started spitting with rain, so was feeling pretty cold. At the top we watched 2x Buzzards soaring high in the sky but apart from that the whole walk had been pretty fruitless. There were 2x farm buildings, which backed onto the forest but they looked deserted.



Farmhouse?

Wendy noticed that they'd very recently both had a fresh coat of paint, so we can only presume that with them being so remote they're only used seasonally and there were plenty of Mistle Thrushes in the fields, which must be full of sheep in the summer. The way back was a bit like going through the motions, as there really was nothing about. Wendy kept reminding me that if we'd done the usual walk at least we'd have had the feeling of anticipation that we might just stumble across a Caper at any point (although out of four attempts on that walk we've only managed that once!). That said though I reckoned this one would be a great walk in the summer, so used it as a recce for future reference, so it hadn't been a complete waste of time after all. Lyca had again got a great walk out of it too and as we walked down the hill through the forest it was still raining very finely.



We were back at the car at 10.18am and with the weather having turned nasty we were a bit worried it was going to put a spanner in the works of our day ahead. I needed to fill the car up, so our next stop was the petrol station in Grantown-on-Spey. After that we headed over to the bakery and grabbed a pasty each, as we were both starving after our walk having had an early breakfast.



Grantown High Street

We took them back to the car to eat and Lyca's nose went into overdrive. Needless to say that she ended up eating Wendy's crusts, as usual, which seemed to go down well but made a right mess of the back seat. With the unfavourable weather outside we decided to nip to Revak Estate where we'd never been before. We were still on the hunt for pressies, especially as Mother's Day was on the horizon, so it would be a good way to kill time while we hoped for the sky to clear.

When we got there I parked up and we cautiously went inside for a look around.



Revak Estate

The shop was full of very expensive gifts and very posh staff, so in our walking gear we felt decidedly out of place. Wendy found a couple of things but I was left feeling uninspired, so would have to look elsewhere. Wendy made use of the

spotlessly clean WC's before we left to save herself from having to find somewhere later on. There was a nice café in the shop too and the menu looked really nice but although we were tempted, with Lyca and sarnies in the car we couldn't stay for lunch :( I hadn't been impressed by Revak at all, it looked to me like the posh person who owned the Hall just thought slapping a gift shop in his Estate would be a good way to make some money. It was like a weird Hunting fraternity version of the Heather Centre. It was only 11.30am when we got back to the car and we were running out of time, so we'd just have to risk going to our next stop, although we knew it would be a waste of time with the weather being so dreadful.

On the way I stopped the car just after Dulnain Bridge when we spotted fields covered in 100's of Pinkfeet and Greylags.



Goose fields

We scanned through them as best we could, desperately trying to pick out something different amongst them but there was nothing. I carried on into the greyness, which got worse the nearer to where we were heading we got. There was only 1 thing we hadn't tried for yet and that was Golden Eagle and we can never leave Scotland without a visit to Findhorn to give it a shot. We've had mixed results there in the past but we've never been so certain that we'd fail as on this attempt. As we drove through the valley we could see the rain lashing down in a sheet against the mountains and we knew that we had no chance. It was a grim picture and neither of us fancied getting out of the car for a walk in it. We turned a corner only to find a tractor in the middle of the road, so I had to stop. There were 2 trees down, which were being cleared and we sat patiently waiting for the blokes to either move, so we could go past or finish.





Road block

It could have been a very long wait indeed if they'd carried on but eventually after 5 minutes one of them put his chainsaw down and moved the tractor out of the way for us.....Phew! A bit further down the valley we spotted a sign saying [www.savestrathdearn.com](http://www.savestrathdearn.com), so I pulled over for a look.



We googled it later and found that Scottish Hydro Electricity Transmissions are proposing to construct an open-air electricity substation 5 miles away. This would be bigger than 14 football fields and the opposition are claiming that it would cause irreparable damage to the natural, historic and cultural heritage and ruin it for the 1000's of visitors the valley gets every year. We had to admit that it sounds like a bad idea all round and that such a wild and beautiful place should always remain so. Hopefully they'll fail in their proposition and it won't happen but only time will tell. Why they can't build something like that in a grot hole instead of somewhere like this is beyond me!

We parked up in the usual car park at 12.24pm and it was absolutely lashing it down.....Grrrrrrr! There was only 1 thing for it and that was to have our lunch and cross our fingers that the weather would improve. Typically it didn't, so any hopes of seeing a Golden Eagle went out the window, although it didn't stop us looking out of sheer desperation.



Grim view

Eagle eyed Wendy found some Red Grouse way up on the side of the mountains and then a single bird right on the top where there was still some snow. She then found the Red Deer but there was no sign of the Wild Goats, Mountain Hares or any other birds at all.....Booooooooooo :( We didn't see any point in sticking round and headed off again at 1.08pm to give Lochindorb a try instead.

We were feeling pretty deflated by the time we got there and the fact that the Red Grouse, which are usually everywhere, were nowhere to be seen either didn't help. Eventually I found 1 and with nothing better to do I suggested a best of 3 Grouse spot. It was really windy and grey and by the time I'd parked up we were drawing on 3-3, as the rules changed to cover the whole area because they were so thin on the ground. I let Lyca out for a wee while Wendy took some pics from the car, as it was too horrible to get out. Lyca seemed particularly impressed by the clean fresh loch water :).



Yummy

A female Goosander was the best I could pull out of the Loch itself and we decided to call it a day. By the time we got to the end of the road Wendy had won



the competition 5-3 (I was driving though!) but to have seen just 8 Red Grouse there was pretty poor count to say the least.

There didn't seem like any point in even trying to fix what was turning out to be a bad day, so we headed to the Heather Centre to continue my pressie search. There was nothing there either apart from something for me :).



Sugar rush coming up!

Wendy suggested trying a small gift shop she'd spotted in Aviemore. I parked up in Tesco car park and we crossed the road to go in for a look. We don't know how that shop survives, there was nothing in it that we could see that would appeal to anyone. It must be some rich persons hobby or something and possibly the worst shop I've ever seen. We then had a look through the outdoor clothing shops for something to do and when I found a coat I could've done with for the entire holiday my eyes lit up. It was green, warm and not a bad price at £80, so I tried it on and it fitted. Nice one! I took it up the counter to pay and nearly fell over backwards when I was charged just £40 because it was in a sale. Sorted :). I'd been looking to get a better winter coat for quite a few years so I was well chuffed and very glad I hadn't splashed out the best part of £300 on a Paramo. After that we popped into Tesco quickly to pick up some bits. From over by the drinks aisle there was an almighty sound of smashing glass and we spun our heads round to see a shocked looking bloke holding his eye. He'd skillfully managed to drop a whole box of beer bottles on the floor and it looked as though he had glass in his eye. I always thought I would be useful in situations like that but my instant reaction was to think, "Ooooh nasty!" then I started walking off.....Ooops! Luckily enough as I walked past he realized it was just liquid. Drama over we headed back to HQ and noticed that the river, which had been so flooded when we'd arrived, had already dropped by about 6 feet.

Back at HQ it was 3.41pm and Wendy was keen to start doing the washing and packing before the morning. She didn't see the point in going anywhere else due to the bad weather and it had been a very disappointing day because of it. I still had ants in my pants and decided that I'd go back to the Nethybridge feeders one last time. When I arrived I was gutted to find that there was no sun on them at all and they were all practically empty. The only bird I saw of note was a male Bullfinch and after just 10 minutes I'd had enough and packed up. I was back again by 4.15pm and set about packing up all the camera gear.

After tea and baths we sat down to chill out after breaking the back of most of the packing.



Making the most of her last night

Everton were playing at 8pm but Eastenders was on at the same time and Wendy certainly didn't want to watch football on the last night of her holiday. I sorted the problem pretty quickly by going into the kitchen thinking I could watch the match on the tiny TV in there. I switched it on and went to get the remote to change channels on the set top box but couldn't find it. I searched high and low but there didn't seem to be one anywhere in the entire house.....Aarrghhhhhh! There was nothing I could do apart from wait for Eastenders to finish and pick it up from there. I did a quick tally of our trip list while I was waiting and wasn't surprised to find that we'd only managed a feeble total of 81 birds up until then. I think it must've been my choice of TV viewing but by 10pm Wendy was nearly falling asleep, so after the fire had died down we switched everything off and turned in for the night.

Friday 13<sup>th</sup> March

Having had an early night we were all up and about by 6.30am but definitely not raring to go, another week would've done us nicely :P. There wasn't even a breath of wind outside and it was lovely and still for the 1<sup>st</sup> time since we'd arrived, which can only be put down to sod's law. I hadn't put the trap camera out the night before because I didn't see any point, I mean we'd caught nothing on it up till then, so it'd been packed last night. When I looked out at the feeders I noticed that something had eaten ½ a block of fat and there were scrapes in the gravel around it :O! Wendy put it down to Crows again but it would be just typical our luck that it was something really interesting like a Badger and we'd missed it. We had the cottage booked until the next day so there was no rush to get out by 10am. The plan was to make good use of the day again and go back to pack the rest of our stuff later. This didn't stop Wendy from starting the packing and cleaning while I was hopping from foot to foot wanting to go out and make the most of our last morning in Scotland.....Grrrrrr! I eventually managed to tear her away from the suitcase and got her out the door at 8.25am with our 1<sup>st</sup> plan being to try Loch Garten feeders again to try for our last chance of getting a Crestie shot. Wendy had given up on photography by then, as her back still wasn't up to it and her luck had been anything but good during the week.



We arrived at Loch Garten to the most amazing sight we'd had all week, which is more like how we imagine Scotland in our heads. The Loch was so still it was like a mirror with a perfect reflection of its banks and the trees surrounding it. Wendy of course had one of her moments and wanted to stop time and stay forever, so she went down to sit on her favourite rock to take it all in. HIPPY!



And relax.....

Even I had to admit that it was pretty impressive but reminded her that she couldn't sit there forever and that we had things to do before leaving later. She reluctantly snapped out of it and dragged herself away looking very glum indeed. It was an idyllic place to be on such a beautiful morning and it was so peaceful apart from the sound of the birds singing and Woodpeckers drumming in the forest. Saying that though, we couldn't hear any Cresties calling and that was the reason we were there. Next we went over to the feeders in the car park and pulled in at 8.40am only to find that another Photographer had beaten us to it. He was sitting in his car right under the feeding station and had the place totally geared up for himself. He'd even gone to the trouble of bringing his own feeder, which he'd placed really low to get the birds down to his level. Very clever. We didn't stand a chance of getting near enough ourselves with him having taken up the entire area, so we decided to forget it but came away having learned a lesson. We had to give the shop at Boat of Garten a final visit as we drove through and came away with a yummy cheese pasty to share. Wendy always leaves the crusts and lets Lyca have them as a rare holiday treat and as usual she made a right mess in the back seat. We'd been hoping for an Osprey to turn up while we were there but we were a bit early and had no such luck. There'd been one over in Perth and Kinross the day before and while we ate our pasty I had another report come in of one in Fife. We were just too far away and there was no chance of any making it back to the Highlands before we left :( If we'd been there a week later the chances are that we'd have been seeing them arrive, which would've been brilliant but hey ho.

Lyca was going mental in the back and whinging like she'd never been for a walk before, so clutching at straws we went back to Boat of Garten. We got out and had a look in the woods 1<sup>st</sup> but yet again there were no Squirrels or Cresties.





Still nowt!

There were 4x Whooper Swans over the road but no sign of the Iceland Gull either, so we decided to change the plan. I took a spin back to Nethybridge, so we could walk to the feeders for one last try. Needless to say that it was totally dead and the feeders were still empty. I decided to put some of the peanuts from the Squirrel feeder into the bird feeder to hopefully coax in some Cresties but there wasn't so much as a squeak. As seems to be the case all too often the little gem we'd found had gone from amazing to terrible rapidly, so we'd been lucky to have had the Cresties there the 1<sup>st</sup> time round. We walked back to the car via the river and weren't surprised that we hadn't seen a single Dipper by the time we got back to the road. Wendy had put some washing on before we'd gone out, so at 10.30am we took a quick detour back to HQ to put it in the dryer, so it could be packed later.

It was only 7c when we headed out again and our next plan was to try Grantown Woods for Cresties. Driving over the bridge we were amazed at how much the water levels had already dropped since we'd 1<sup>st</sup> arrived just a few days ago.



That's more like it!

We parked up in the Poortown Woods car park at 11.05am and starting off our walk we were very surprised as to how quiet it was. Although it was a lovely



place to be on our last morning there wasn't much going on at all. Not only that but the holiday was obviously starting to take its toll and we felt lethargic and tired. Even Lyca didn't seem quite as eager to pull on her lead but was still enjoying all the new smells on offer.



Poortown Wood

We were still on Caper alert while we walked around even though it was probably too late in the day for them. Needless to say we didn't see one but Wendy found the tree where we'd found a Crestie nest a few years ago. We hadn't heard a single Crestie by then and it was obviously too early in the season for them to be thinking of nesting, so we carried on. By then the sun had come out, so we were far too hot in all our winter gear, which made the trek back up the hill to the car even harder. The path seemed to go on forever and we were really flagging in the heat. Every time we thought we were on the home straight we'd turn another corner only to find we'd been wrong....Urrghhhhh! With our fruitless start to the day we were very pleased when we were nearly back at the car to eventually hear a Crestie calling from above us. Wendy found the bird right up at the top of a tree but while we watched it something else caught my eye. A Treecreeper had flown in onto the tree trunk right in front of me, so I raised the camera I was carrying. I'd taken Wendy's lighter set up because I didn't fancy carrying my heavy one all the way round for nothing. When I raised it I noticed it was on an aperture of F18, so I quickly adjusted the settings only to find that the Treecreeper had gone.....Typical!

Finally we dragged ourselves up the hill to the car park and breathed a sigh of relief to be back. Straight away we picked up the calls of Cresties and looked up to find them flitting through the trees right next to the car. We'd just walked round the woods and had nothing and there they were happily hanging out next to the car where we'd started. After all that effort we may as well have just parked up and let them come to us.....but that would've been too easy :P. Not only that but we needed to tire Lyca out before the long drive back to Heysham, just to put a positive slant on the whole uneventful morning. That marked the end of our trip and as we slumped back into the car and cracked open the pan au chocolat, as a consolation prize, we decided that the only thing left to do was to go back to HQ and pack up :(.

It was 12.51pm when we got back, so before doing anything else we had our lunch. I sat by the window to watch the feeders while I ate mine but didn't expect to see anything different, so imagine my surprise when I spotted a



**Yellowhammer** sitting on the fence! It dropped down and started feeding off the ground, so I called it out to Wendy, who was at the back of the room at the table and came running over for a look. This was our 1<sup>st</sup> Yellowhammer of the trip and although we knew they were in the area, from our last stay, we hadn't seen or heard one until then. Of course I grabbed my camera and started firing off some shots through the dirty window before we left, which unfortunately turned out to be just as bad as I'd expected.



Yellowhammer

It hadn't been the highest count we'd ever had on a trip but the appearance of the Yellowhammer had just put our total to (cue the fanfare) 82 birds! :( It'd been a pretty quiet week bird wise, so we hadn't expected to get near the 100 mark but 82 did seem pretty low. When Wendy had finished the last of the packing and cleaning and I'd loaded up the car we were ready to reluctantly leave. As always she took some photos before closing the door for the last time and at 2.33pm we waved a fond farewell to Clunymhore and drove away.



Bye Bye HQ :(



We couldn't help but leave with heavy hearts at how different our week would've been if the Red Squirrels and Cresties had visited our garden like last time though. We'd both have been going home with decent shots but it would've been even harder to tear ourselves away in the end. The temperature in my car was reading 9.5c, which was about the warmest it had been all week and totally typical.

Feeling depressed at having to leave we knew exactly what would cheer us up and be the perfect parting shot. I parked up at Inschriach Nurseries at 2.56pm and we trotted over the road to The Potting Shed for some of the best cake in the world.



The Potting Shed

Obviously we had a look out at the feeders for Red Squirrels but although it was very busy with birds, mainly Chaffinches, there were none. We went back to the counter and chose a slice of their Lindt chocolate cake to take back to the car to share. After that it was 3.05pm and definitely time to get our skates on, so we headed off back towards the Perthshire Tourist Route. I was going to just bomb down the A9 to get down south as quickly as possible but at the last minute thought we might as well go the slower more scenic route as we had the time. Before we knew it we were back at Kenmore and it felt like only a couple of days ago that we'd been there before heading in the opposite direction.



Kenmore

It looked like we were heading into some rain up ahead, so Wendy thought it'd be a good idea to pull over and let Lyca out for a wee. On the way up to Scotland there had still been a bit of snow covering the ground but a week later it was nearly all gone.



Where's the snow gone?

Further on Wendy spotted a **Stonechat** sitting on a fence and we both shouted, "83!" It was only a Stonechat but we needed all the help we could get by then :P. After we'd cleared the steep decline into the valley she found a Dipper sitting on a rock in the stream right next to the car. I'd overshot it but reversed back up for a quick look, as although it wasn't a new bird for the trip they're still great birds to see for us. When we arrived at the Amulree Road I pulled over and we both started desperately scanning the moorland for a Black Grouse. As I scoured the area a **Snipe** landed and disappeared into the grassy tufts but Wendy was searching elsewhere by then and didn't see it. Her diversion paid off though when she called out, "**Short-eared Owl!**" hunting over the side of the hills.





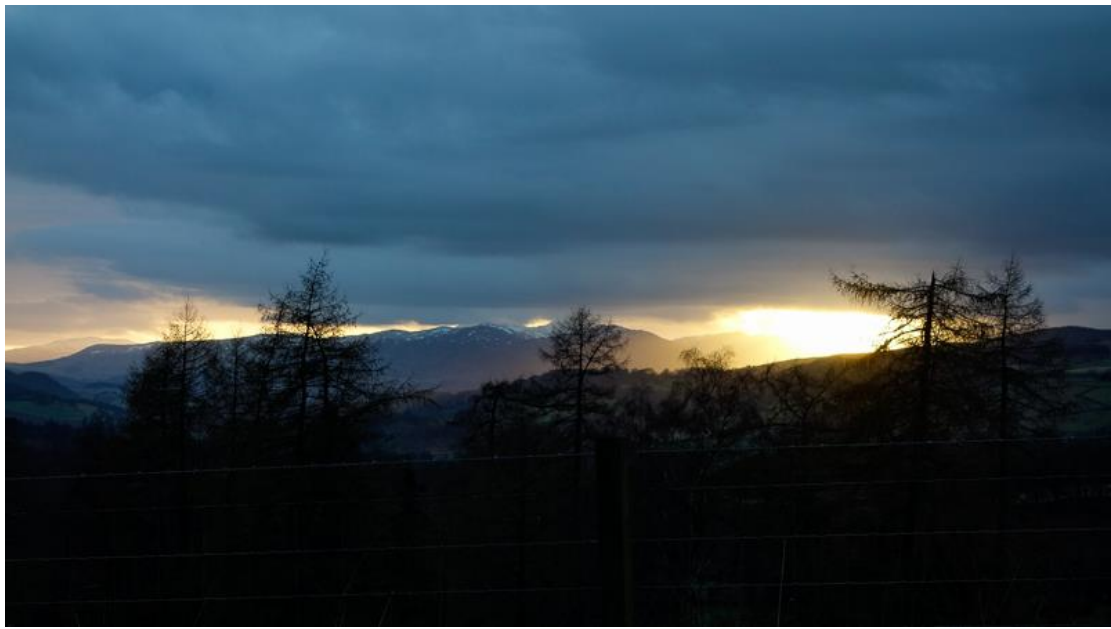
Amulree Road

We were now on 85 birds and more desperate than ever to find a Black Grouse. When I spotted a very dark looking Grouse, miles off, I got Wendy onto it and we both watched it intently. It did appear to be black but it didn't move a muscle for ages and when it did we both concluded that it was just a Red Grouse.....Boooooooo :(.

Not prepared to give up that easily I drove a bit further up the road and found a passing place to park up in to carry on our search while we had our tea. Lyca's dinner was put in front of her on the back seat but she turned her nose up at it and looked as if she was thinking, "What the.....?"

Eventually, even though the situation was slightly unconventional, she decided to eat it and then looked excitedly at Wendy with her tail wagging for her Dentastick. Lyca sorted, we grabbed the food bag from the back and tucked in to our 2<sup>nd</sup> sarnie of the day. Mine didn't touch the sides and after I'd finished I got back to the job in hand and carried on scanning the area while Wendy was still only ½ way through hers. After not seeing any at Findhorn I was pleased to find 2x **Mountain Hares** still with some patchy white fur up on the hill, so Wendy stopped eating for a look. The SEO was still around but it soon became apparent that there were in fact 2 of them. I spotted that another bird had come in and was closer than the 1<sup>st</sup>, so we watched it dive down and land on the ground. It'd obviously missed its potential meal but it sat in the grass for ages just looking around.

It was 5.36pm by then and having had our tea and adding 3 new birds and 1x mammal to our list we pulled the plug and got going. Driving through the town of Crieff we saw a man walking a lovely black Cockerpoo, which is a rarity in those parts. The Cockerpoo army doesn't seem to have invaded that far north yet but it's obviously starting to creep in slowly. The sky had cleared as we drove further south, so when the light began to fade we were treated to an amazing sunset.



Drive-by sunset shot

My petrol tank was running low, so I made a quick detour to top it up at a garage in Sterling so we could make it to Asda, where it's much cheaper. We carried on until we reached our traditional stop off at Annandale Services and although I just wanted to keep going Wendy's back was giving her grief, so she needed to stretch her legs and Lyca probably needed a wee too. It was 7.42pm when I parked up and while Wendy hobbled into the Services to use the WC's I let Lyca out. She had a good sniff around on the grass but didn't perform, so I put her back in the car. Having already eaten Wendy didn't need to get food, so was really quick and we were back on the road in no time. As always we boomed when we hit the 'Welcome to England' sign at 8.12pm :). Instead of going to the pub we'd found in the Lake District last time I'd found one called The King's Head, which wasn't so out of the way and hopefully not engulfed in flames! It was in Ravenstonedale, Kirby Stephen and looked really nice as well as being dog friendly, so we reckoned it was worth a shot.

It'd been a long day and hard to believe that we'd been walking around Scottish forests just a few hour ago but at 9.02pm we arrived at The King's Head.....Phew!



The Pub



The car park was full and there were cars parked up the road by the hedge, so it looked as though it was really busy. This wasn't what I wanted at all but with no other plans Wendy suggested going in anyway to check it out and grabbed Lyca's bottle of water and bowl, so she could have a drink too. As soon as Wendy opened the car door she said, "**Tawny Owl!**" and sure enough there was a pair calling from the trees somewhere nearby. This was great, as we hadn't heard any during our week away. This put our trip list at a grand total of 86 birds, so we wandered down the road and into the pub. Fortunately it was just the dining room area that was busy and we managed to find a quiet area in the bar. I sat down at a table next to the open log fire and Lyca, after standing up on her back legs dancing with all the excitement, settled on the floor next to me.



"Woof...make mine an Absinthe!"

Wendy brought some drinks over to the table and then set about pouring Lyca one. Lyca was going nuts and was obviously really thirsty but just as she stuck her snout towards the flow of water Wendy realized that she'd accidentally grabbed my bottle of Irn Bru by mistake.....Doh! No wonder Lyca was so eager but her luck was out and Wendy quickly swiped the bowl up and scurried off to the toilets to rinse it out and fill it with water. The dining room soon cleared and the pub became a lot quieter, so we could finally relax. A few local bar flies had gathered in our room and with them came an increase in volume. A couple of them were Cumbrian farmers so the topic of conversation wasn't really to Wendy's taste, being vegetarian. They were so loud that it was unavoidable, so she just had to try and switch off from it. The others seemed to be family members and friends with the barmaids boyfriend added in for good measure. After their gruesome tales it started to sound more like an evening with Fred Dibner or Guy Martin, which was far more entertaining. One thing's for sure though, the Cumbrian accent is definitely a strange one!

We'd started to feel a bit peckish, so Wendy got a bowl of Pistachios to nibble on while she was at the bar. These went down a treat but we were still hungry, so next time she was there she thought she'd try the cheese and paprika popcorn she'd spotted. She had a bit and instantly screwed her face up in disgust. For the life of me I don't know why but I tried some too and after her reaction you'd think I'd have known better. Rather than being the interesting popcorn we'd envisaged it was indescribably disgusting and tasted worse than a pair of 20 year matured sweaty socks....Bleurrghhhh! The taste lingered and repeated on us for the rest of the night too, so Wendy really wished she'd just been normal and bought a packet of crisps. Lyca slept through the whole thing but at 11.17pm we

thought we'd better wake her up and head off. Apart from the nasty taste in our mouths from the popcorn it'd been a nice pub to end the trip with and we left happy. It felt like we were in the middle of nowhere as we walked back up the road to the car and the Tawny Owls were still calling in the distance.

The rest of the journey was non eventful and having hoped for a Barn Owl in the headlights we had no such luck. When I finally reached Asda I filled my car up with petrol and since realizing the store is 24hrs we went in to kill some time. This was a good move, as I picked up some bargain oil for my car while I was in there. We arrived at Heysham at 12.38pm only to find that the cars from the evening sailing from Douglas were only just getting off. Surely this would mean we were going to be delayed by at least an hour and would be in for a long, boring wait especially as by then we were totally knackered and just wanted to crash out in the cabin :( Lyca curled up on Wendy's knee and went back to sleep, just to rub salt in the wounds and also give her a dead leg! After what felt like the longest hour and 20 minutes of our lives we eventually boarded whilst the lorries were still loading up to obviously speed things up, at 2am. We dragged ourselves up the never-ending stairs to get the cabin key from the desk. They'd done a great job at making up for lost time though and we were on our way home at 2.21am, which was just 6 minutes later than scheduled.....Yey! As soon as our heads hit the pillows we were out like lights and slept for the whole crossing until my alarm went off at 5.30am. I'd been a bit optimistic and had woken us up a bit too early, which Wendy was very grumpy about. We docked at 5.57am, which was pretty good considering the delay earlier. By 6.10am we were home and as usual I brought all the stuff in and Wendy set about unpacking the suitcases.

We'd had another good trip and I suppose we'd seen everything that we'd expected to. Clunymhore the 2<sup>nd</sup> time around had been a bit disappointing with the place being a bit grubby and cold on arrival and the absence of the Cresties and Squirrels in the garden. After we'd settled in we'd had another enjoyable stay there though and we've probably been spoilt by the other amazing places we've stayed at since we were there 1<sup>st</sup> time around. Having worried that the Harlequin Duck would've disappeared by the time we got there we'd had cracking views of a cracking bird, which we couldn't sniff at. Our trip to Aberdeen had been interesting and it rewarded us with our only lifer of the trip and certainly helped to clock up the miles as we ended the week having covered 1,200 in total. The lonesome Ptarmigan on Cairngorm had been a real bonus find especially as we'd found we couldn't have gone any higher up due to the conditions. It was a real shame the Snow Buntings hadn't been around, as they're usually relatively easy to find near the car park. Our brief encounter with a Goshawk over the woods at Nethybridge had given us an unexpected bit of excitement and on our local patch as well! Not getting out early enough had meant we'd totally missed out on Capercaillie, which was totally gutting looking back on it. We really should've made more of an effort to try to see such an amazing bird but there's always next time. We'd had no problems finding Cresties, which neither of us could ever imagine getting bored of and I even managed to get my best ever Crestie shots. Red Squirrels had been disappointingly hard to catch up with and we only had 1 good sighting during the entire week. It's quality not quantity that counts though so we were pleased that it'd been in its natural habitat and not on some feeders. We'd only managed a pathetic total of 86 bird species by the end but we were there too early for anything other than the resident birds. It would've been nice if we'd been there for the Osprey's returning but maybe we'll just have to plan it better with work and go a bit later next time.



## Map of places visited



## Bird List

Mute Swan	Grey Heron	Collared Dove	Great Tit
Whooper Swan	Red Kite	Tawny Owl	Crested Tit
Pink-footed Goose	Goshawk	Short-eared Owl	Coal Tit
White-fronted Goose	Sparrowhawk	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Willow Tit
Greylag Goose	Buzzard	Skylark	Nuthatch
Canada Goose	Kestrel	Meadow Pipit	Treecreeper
Wigeon	Peregrine	Grey Wagtail	Jay
Teal	Moorhen	Pied Wagtail	Magpie
Mallard	Coot	Dipper	Jackdaw
Pintail	Oystercatcher	Wren	Rook
Shoveler	Golden Plover	Dunnock	Carriion Crow
Tufted Duck	Lapwing	Robin	Raven
Eider	Snipe	Stonechat	Starling
<b>Harlequin Duck</b>	Curlew	Blackbird	House Sparrow
Goldeneye	Black-headed Gull	Fieldfare	Chaffinch
Goosander	Common Gull	Song Thrush	Greenfinch
Red Grouse	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Redwing	Goldfinch
Ptarmigan	Herring Gull	Mistle Thrush	Siskin
Red-legged Partridge	Iceland Gull	Goldcrest	Common Crossbill
Pheasant	Great Black-backed Gull	Long-tailed Tit	Bullfinch
Little Grebe	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Blue Tit	Yellowhammer
Cormorant	Woodpigeon		