

Having ridden out the long and holiday-less void between Oct and Feb our thoughts turned to what we were going to do in March. Wendy was instantly drawn towards the Highlands but I wondered if there was somewhere different we could try and contemplated trying Norfolk for the winter birds. After toying with various ideas, including waiting until May to go to Extremadura and then going to Scotland in June again for all the Dragonflies and Butterflies we missed out on last time, we unanimously agreed that neither of us could wait that long. Eventually I went back to plan A with, call us greedy, the addition of going back to Scotland in June as well!! This time around I reckoned we should stay somewhere in Boat of Garten as it ticked all the boxes and we'd never stayed there before. If we could find somewhere that backed onto the Woods then we had a better chance of Crestie and Red Squirrel in the garden, which we disappointingly lacked at our cottage the year before. We'd had nothing but relentless rain and gales since Christmas so on a particularly dark and wet weekend when we'd just about had enough of it I started looking for somewhere to stay. I had loads of other things to do so decided to set Wendy the task of finding a cottage this time. Thinking I was going to be in for a long wait I couldn't believe my ears when 10 minutes later she shouted for me to come and look at a place. Initially I laughed out loud when I saw her choice and the price to go with it but the more I looked at it the more I could see her point. The house itself was amazing, which suited Wendy but the back garden had a gate, which went straight into the Woods, which was perfect for me. You can't get a better early morning walk than that from your doorstep! If I could wangle a 2-person discount it might just be doable, so I set about emailing them with my request. Luckily they replied and were willing to give it to us at a discount, so VERY pleased with their offer I booked it.....Happy days :). Typically we'd chosen to go away at Easter so the Steam Packet prices were sky high, just to add insult to injury, but it was tough luck and we just had to pay it.

There was literally nothing being reported in the whole of Scotland apart from Ring-necked Ducks at Milton Loch and a small roadside pond at Pitlochry plus a red-head Smew at Castle Loch, which were all just outside of Dumfries. Although they weren't remotely mind blowing a Ring-necked Duck would still be a lifer for Wendy. If either of them stayed they could be worth a check, as I'd stuck to our usual plan of staying in the Dumfries Travelodge and heading to Ken-Dee Marshes on our 1st morning. At least we had the chance of seeing Willow Tit there, which we wouldn't get anywhere else. There was no point going out of our way to Carlingwark Loch, as there was nothing there, so I ditched that off completely, which would be handy as we needed to get up to the cottage in good time to get our Tesco delivery. The only question was did we still need to go to Gatehouse of Fleet to get an amazing breakfast at Galloway Lodge? Wendy didn't need to buy the entire stock of her favourite chutney this time, as she'd taken advantage of their free delivery at Christmas but thinking about breakfast plus all the Red Kites at Laurieston I reckoned that plan was a definite keeper. Just as we seemed to be getting somewhere the Ring-necked Duck at Pitlochry decided to move to Carlingwark Loch, so all our pre-made plans went out the window.....Typical!

The weather up in the Cairngorms was still very wintery with the mountains being covered in copious quantities of snow and ski resorts still in full swing. That was until a couple of days before we left when it seemed to have thawed and practically all disappeared! The forecast was looking decidedly hit and miss for snow while we were there but it certainly didn't look like we'd be taking our coats off and rolling up our sleeves in any heat waves this time around! I'd

ordered more foot warmers in preparation and we made a mental note to actually use them instead of battling it out and wishing we had when it was too late. I'd also ordered some Yaktrax just in case we needed them, which Wendy found rather amusing and slightly daunting at the same time. Her attitude was, "If it's too snowy we're not climbing it!" Let's just say I wasn't going to disagree after trying to get further up Cairngorm in pursuit of a Ptarmigan last year and discovering 1st hand just how lethal it was. We'd even ordered Lyca a new coat for the trip, as her old one was more like a waistcoat and wasn't going to cut the mustard in any inevitably wet and cold weather. Browsing the website it was hard to resist buying her some very amusing looking but probably extremely practical boots as well. They would mean no more wet muddy paws and a bit of grip on the snow but after realizing that although the image was funny it'd be virtually impossible to actually get her to wear them never mind walk in them! It would've been an expensive mistake to make, as they'd have set us back more than a decent pair of walking boots for us :O! Shame :P.

The run up to our trip was fraught with the usual anxieties like whether the crossing was going to be rough or even go at all! Was the weather in Scotland going to be OK and not blowing a gale and lashing down with rain every day? It's always a gamble going away in March especially as the weather at home had been so nice all week. Surely come the day we were leaving it was going to change for the worse? As usual the temperatures in Aviemore were a not so balmy -4c 1st thing in the morning but rising to 14c later in the day, which doesn't make packing any easier! Braemar was 19c the day before we left! We'd need all our heat pads, base layers and warmest clothing on when we left HQ but then we'd have to be able to remove layers when it started to heat up. That's if it did heat up.....Urrghhhh! For the 1st time I decided to take a photo of just the birding gear that I pack to take away and was slightly shocked at how much there was when it was all laid out!!



:O!

Friday 18th March

Wendy had taken the day off to prepare in a civilized manner but I had to go in to work. Wendy's Mum was also away, so I'd been walking Lyca at 6.30am on the days we were both at work for the past week, so it was nice to be relieved of that particular duty when we had such a long day ahead of us. As usual I worked through my lunch to get out early, so I could get myself ready too. Unbelievably

there wasn't a breath of wind, so it looked like we'd be in for a very pleasant crossing for a change. Luckily when I got home Wendy was organised and practically ready to go (not doing her tax return this time!!!) Lyca seemed to know we were going away and was jumping around at the front door raring to go. We set off at 6.42pm and headed down to the Sea Terminal early for a change.

When we arrived at 6.53pm the car park was absolutely heaving and it took us ages just to get to the check in hut! We kicked off our trip list with **Herring Gull** and for the 1st time ever, that I know of anyway, the announcement came for car drivers to board BEFORE the foot passengers! We let ourselves into the cabin at 7.28pm and Lyca had lead the way up the stairs like a total pro. She knew exactly what was going on and was being really hyper, so she must've been excited. The 1st thing she always does is has a good sniff around to see if she can find any food. This is probably because she remembers the time she found the contents of an entire bag of nuts behind the cushion of one of the beds. Typical dog! I then realized we hadn't been given the free wifi code and there was no way I was living for 4 hours without internet access so I had to go back to the reception desk to wangle a code. Luckily the bloke remembered me so it didn't require any explanations.....Phew!

We embarked early at 7.38pm, so we really hoped this would mean arriving at Heysham early too. I still hadn't eaten, so Wendy rang the room service bell and shortly after I had my usual boat meal of chicken burger and chips sitting in front of me.....Om nom nom :). Too many of the chips were touching the coleslaw but this only worked out better for Wendy who polished them off along with the disgusting rabbit food. The excitement of eating was short lived and once it'd gone we were pretty bored and had to resort to watching TV. Lyca, who was lying on Wendy, started to breathe heavily, so of course Wendy started to freak out. I seemed to remember her doing it before on the boat and assured her that it was nothing but my words fell on deaf ears....Urrghhhh! She soon stopped and fell asleep, so the panic was over.



Diva dog!

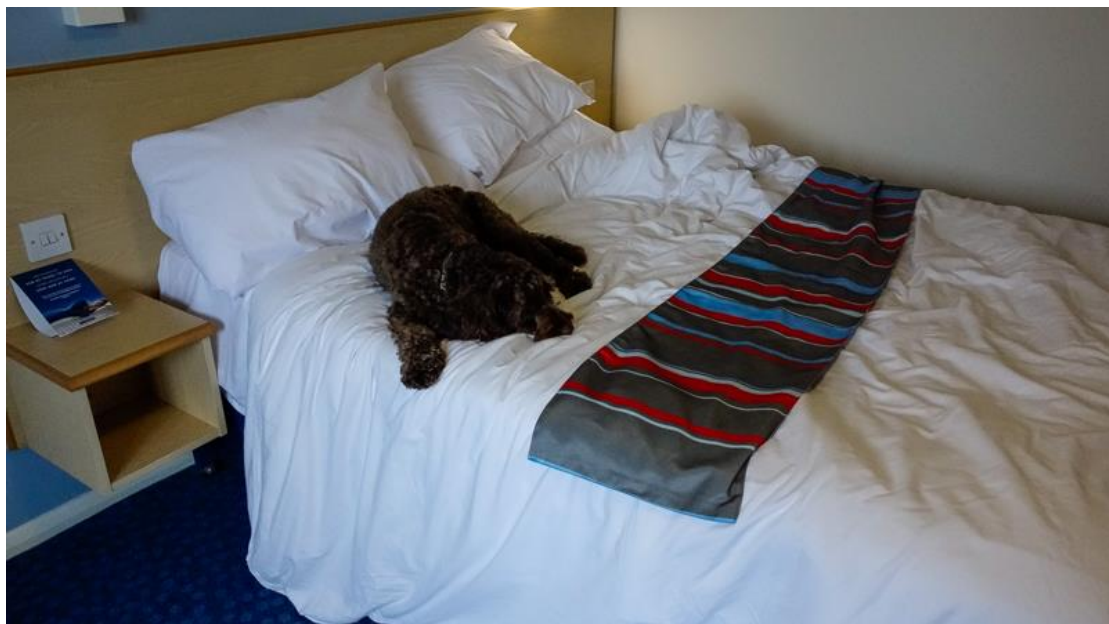
After a lovely smooth crossing we finally got the announcement at 11.12pm that we'd soon be docking, so we started to gather up our stuff in preparation for a quick get away. Back at the car Lyca reluctantly got into the back seat and was clicked into her harness after trying her best to get onto Wendy's knee in the

front. I'd had to park right next to the chimney again, so my windscreen and wing mirrors were caked in oil residue yet again.....Grrrrrrr! Having washed my car before we left I was slightly annoyed but after giving them a quick clean it looked like I'd got away without the dreaded smears and we disembarked at 11.26pm. Although I hadn't had any grief from my back recently as soon as we set off it started to hurt, which wasn't the best start to our trip. I'd be digging out the Ibuprofen in the morning before the long drive up north :(.

Saturday 19th March

It was a nice calm night to start our journey and because of that we kept our hopes up of seeing something on the way. After a while we'd seen nothing apart from a sign for the 'Devils Porridge Exhibition' and for the life of us we couldn't begin to imagine what that was! Wendy exclaimed, "We'll be lucky to even see a Rabbit at this rate!" and a split second later spotted some **Rabbits** on the grass verge. Unfortunately the same didn't apply when she tried it for Barn Owl though, that would be asking too much :P. It was with great relief that we arrived at the Travelodge in Dumfries at 1.11am and this time Wendy told me not to try carrying all our bags up in one go. This meant that I'd have to do 2 journeys but anything is better than doing your back in before you've even started your holiday. Wendy heard **Lapwing** flying over as we wandered through the car park and as usual Lyca danced at the guy on reception. Up at the room Lyca was very thirsty and guzzled 2 bowls of water before settling down on the bed. Strangely we couldn't get to sleep as quickly as we normally would, Wendy was freezing and her shoulder was sore and I just couldn't switch off.

The next thing we knew was that it was 7.23am and we needed to get up and get going. We could hear **Sparrows** chirping cheerfully outside, so I got up and took Lyca out for a wee. There were also all the usual birds and I racked up **Rook, Starling, Robin, Dunnock, Black-headed Gull, Woodpigeon, Blackbird** and **Collared Dove** on my 1st recce before heading back in to get ready. Wendy gave Lyca her breakfast and again seemed to be on good form but Lyca then proceeded to go back to bed for a snooze, which kind of made us a bit jealous.



Raring to go.....

We hadn't had much sleep but Wendy wasn't remotely grumpy and the thought of where we were going to be at the end of the day was enough to keep her happy. When we were ready to go we headed downstairs to load all our stuff

back into the car. We added **Feral Pigeon** and **Chaffinch** before setting off at 8.45am and my car was telling us that it was 6.5c. It wasn't the nicest day, being grey and overcast but at least it wasn't freezing cold and raining and we'd got away without Lyca putting muddy paw prints all over the clean white bed sheets.....Phew!

My plan was to head straight for Gatehouse of Fleet as nothing had been reported for days but something in my head was telling me to just try Milton Loch, as it wasn't far out of the way. I decided that if there was an obvious turn off for it then I'd do it, as it'd be somewhere new for us and was worth going to just for that fact if nothing else. Wendy spotted a **Kestrel** sitting on some wires just after we set off and then we had our 1st **Buzzard** of the trip flying over some fields. There was a **Mute Swan** on a roadside pool, **Carrion Crows** in a field and some **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** on the roofs of an industrial estate. Just before we got to the Loch we had some **Greylag Geese** flying over the fields. Luckily the Loch was well sign posted, as I'd hoped, so I took the plunge and went for it. When we found Milton Loch it was bigger than we'd expected but it didn't look like there was anywhere to park up to view it from. I carried on driving along side it until luckily I spotted a boat launching ramp and drove in. I parked up at 9.07am and turned the car off so we could have a scan.



Milton Loch

There were plenty of **Tufted Ducks**, **Wigeon** and **Goldeneye** bobbing about quite close in but surprisingly no Little Grebes. Over on the far bank we found **Canada Geese** and **Shelduck** but there wasn't much else, so I went back to looking at the Ducks. While I was looking I noticed that the male Tuftie, which was right in front of me, looked slightly odd and gave it a 2nd glance. I noticed its blindingly obvious grey sides and it suddenly occurred to me that we'd both totally forgotten why we were there! We'd gone to get Wendy a lifer and it came as a shock to me when I suddenly realized that I was looking straight at the very bird. I called out, "**Ring-necked Duck!**" to Wendy who quickly snapped out of her daze and got onto the bird. Unbelievable! Which planet had we been on to forget about it? Doh! It had been the nearest bird to us as well but it was now swimming away. I jumped out of the car and grabbed P900, as my DSLR kit was still all packed away, and hurried down to the waters edge to try for a record shot but it carried on swimming further and further away until it was too far away for anything. Urrghhhhh! Neither of us had expected any lifers on the trip at all so Wendy was pleased to have got one and that it was the male of the

species too. I'd managed to get a recognizable shot of it, which was better than I expected at such a distance and had just had the best view I've ever had of a Ring-necked Duck as well, so I couldn't grumble.



Ring-necked Duck

Excitement over our thoughts turned to breakfast, so we set off again towards Gatehouse of Fleet.

We saw 3x **Whooper Swans** followed by our 1st **Red Kite** soaring over a field while driving through Springholme. This was closely followed by another Red Kite and then another, so it really felt like our holiday had started. Next up was a **Blue Tit** flying over the road and then we hit the overwhelming smell of poo! We then saw a farmer out on a tractor muck spreading in one of the fields and noticed that it'd attracted the attention of loads **Common Gulls**.....Yuk! Shortly after that we were driving down the main road into Gatehouse of Fleet, not before the Sat Nav had decided to send us down a stupid long way first.....Grrrrrrr!

I parked up at 10am in the car park next to Galloway Lodge and decided that while Wendy went in for a look in the shop and to order our food I'd take Lyca down to the river.



Gatehouse of Fleet

I was hoping for either Dipper or Kingfisher but unfortunately my luck was out and there was no sign of either of them but I did add **Nuthatch** and **Song Thrush** to our list though. Two women in their 60's were admiring Lyca and I had to laugh when I heard one of them say, "Oooooo what a bonny dog!" Lyca was enjoying having a good sniff about but I couldn't take too long and had to put her back into the car before going into the café to give Wendy a hand. Near the front door I saw the box of RSPB pin badges and remembered that my Dad had tasked me with helping increase his collection. I grabbed three off the list I'd been given, then quickly noticed that one of them was also on his "got" list!!! Thanks Dad. I had to go back and was given a suspicious look from the woman at the counter when I set about picking up a different one to swap it with without putting any money in.



Pressies

When I got to the café section Wendy was just finishing her order and if I'd been 10 seconds later I'd have been too late to order some of the yummy looking chocolate cake.....Phew! We sat down at a table and waited for our food to be prepared and when we had the cappuccino, cake and my Irn Bru Wendy suggested I took it down to the car and she'd follow me down with the rest. I

gathered it together and headed off not even getting as far as the door before I heard Wendy coming up behind me with our food. Back at the car we demolished our breakfast while watching some Sparrows busily taking nesting materials under the roof of a nearby house. As always Wendy's cheese and tomato toastie and my sausage bap went down a treat but my heart sank when I took a mouthful of the cake. It was really dry and I didn't enjoy it at all, which of course Wendy found highly amusing.....Boooooooooo :(We'd already wasted enough time, so at 10.35am we thought we'd better get our skates on and left for our 2nd stop of the day.

It was a pleasantly warm start to the day at 5.5c, which we hadn't expected and it made us curious as to what it was going to be like up in the Highlands. We saw 2x **Great Tits** flying over the road ahead of us and driving through Galloway Forest we heard a Wren singing at the bridge where we often see Grey Wagtail. There wasn't one this time, of course but a few minutes later as we turned right to go to our location we saw another Red Kite, so I jumped out and grabbed a shot.



Red Kite

Next up was a **Pheasant** and then 7 more Red Kites, which was brilliant to see, although they look like specks of dirt on the screen in the picture below.



Red Kites over a field – if you use a magnifying glass!

As we got closer a **Jay** flew over the road and Wendy spotted a big flock of Thrushes in a field, which turned out to be **Fieldfare**.

At 11.04am we pulled into the car park at Ken-Dee Marshes and clambered out of the car looking forward to stretching our legs and seeing what was about. Lyca seemed as excited as ever and was raring to go and I decided to bring both cameras so that Wendy didn't miss out in case we struck lucky. We quickly picked up on **Long-tailed Tits** feeding frantically through the gorse and some **Goldfinches** flying in before we'd even left the car park. Wendy reckoned she heard Raven but I wasn't so sure, so she discounted it until she had more to go on.

We hadn't got very far at all when we heard a pitifully feeble call and spotted the white rump of the culprit as it flew between trees. There was a nice pair of **Bullfinches** just ahead of us and although they were close enough for shots they never came into the clear. It was all feeling very spring like with the birds already pairing up and next up was a pair of **Wrens** toing and froing from a gorse bush. Looking around we found a **Mistle Thrush**, **Coal Tit**, a **Great-spotted Woodpecker** flying over towards some trees and a pretty impressive 11x Red Kites over the Loch. The birds seemed to be quite active, so we crossed our fingers for some luck down at the hide. Wendy told me she could hear a **Raven** again and this time we spotted a pair, which we noticed were building a nest in a tree to our left. We didn't see anything else after that and it all fell very quiet including when we walked through the trees on the boardwalk to the hide.....Uh oh! Luckily there was nobody else inside, so we let ourselves in and sat down for a scan. The feeders were fully stocked but there just wasn't any birds around, which didn't bode well for our target bird. While we waited we had a scan of the pool picking up 3x **Goosanders** (1x male), **Teal**, **Oystercatcher**, a pair of **Pintail** and **Redshank**.



Loch Ken

While Wendy scanned the far edge of the pool she found a wader near the Redshanks, which she reckoned could be a Ruff, so I used my camera to zoom in on the bird, which confirmed that it was indeed a rather scruffy looking **Ruff**. There was also a **Cormorant** sitting hunched up on the far bank but still no sign of what we were after. There were now a few Tits coming in as well as a Nuthatch but compared to how busy we'd seen it in the past it was very quiet. I asked Wendy if she'd read the reports book in front of her, which she hadn't, so she opened it for a look. She said that there were reports from the other hide, which we'd never been to because we'd always been lucky at the 1st hide.....before now! Even though we really needed to get going I reckoned we should give the other hide a go, seeing as this was the only place we were going to see this bird and we hadn't gone all that way to give up at the 1st hurdle.

The 2nd hide didn't look that far away and we could see it from where we were but in reality the walk there was much further than we'd expected. Wendy was worried that we were spending too long at Ken-Dee and were wasting precious time but I was adamant to at least give it a go. When we finally got there we went in and sat down only adding **Grey Heron** to our list.



New Hide

The Ruff, which had been so far away before was now feeding away much nearer to us but it looked as though our extra mile had resulted in having nothing to show for it. There was only one feeder at this hide and when we looked at it there was nothing on it at all.....Uh oh! Wendy reckoned that it was definitely time to leave but I suggested we gave it 2 more minutes and set the alarm on my phone. It was a VERY good job I hadn't listened to her when all of a sudden our target bird appeared on the feeder and I called out in total shock, "Wendy, Wendy, **Willow Tit!**" We both watched the bird at close range before getting our cameras poised for some pics. Wendy noticed that it had a droopy wing, which fortunately didn't appear to be affecting it but didn't make for a good shot at all. We were willing it to turn around and show its best side but it just wasn't playing ball! Luckily a 2nd bird flew in, which meant that we could both fill our boots as well as the cards in our cameras! I was going to be very busy later deleting 1000's of Willow Tit photos.....Urrghhhhh! This was my favourite shot and both of us were pleased to have had our best ever views and bettered any of our existing shots.



Willow Tit

Then 2x pairs of Bullfinches appeared and came close in as well! We couldn't resist having a pop, seeing as they're never in the clear. Wendy managed to get her 1st and good Bullfinch shots too, so all in all our extra time spent at Ken-Dee had been well worth it :).



Bullfinch

I could've stayed there longer but Wendy reminded me once again that we needed to get going and we had quite a walk back to the car. When we headed back through the trees we heard our 1st **Goldcrest** of the trip singing. It was quite sunny and warm by the time we were on our approach to the car park and we flushed another 2x Red Kites out of a tree next to the footpath. We'd certainly seen enough of them to keep us happy and just to top it all off I spotted another Willow Tit feeding high up in another tree. Having dressed for the cold start to the morning we were now absolutely boiling with full sun beaming down on us and no wind. We couldn't complain though as we'd been very lucky to have had such nice weather so far.

By the time we were back at the car we were roasting but it was 1.24pm, so we ate our crisps and cereal bar to tide us over until teatime. When we drove off it was 1.37pm and after a quick look at my sat nav our eta at the cottage was going to be 6.20pm, which didn't seem too bad considering. This, of course, wasn't taking into account any other stop offs during the day, so the reality probably wasn't going to pan out like that :(. Shortly after leaving Wendy spotted a load of Red Kites floating over a field, so I stopped for a look. Unbelievably we counted 40 but there were definitely more than that but we gave up counting in the end. The field must've been the site for a feeding station to have pulled in such huge numbers. The next thing we saw was a **Roe Deer** in some woods at the side the road but we were on the look out for something else. There's no dog poo bins at Ken-Dee, so we still had a bag of it in the boot of the car and desperately needed to find a bin somewhere before it stank the car out! As we drove alongside a Loch Wendy spotted one, so I quickly pulled over and she jumped out. She also grabbed her camera for a pic of the nice scenery.



Loch

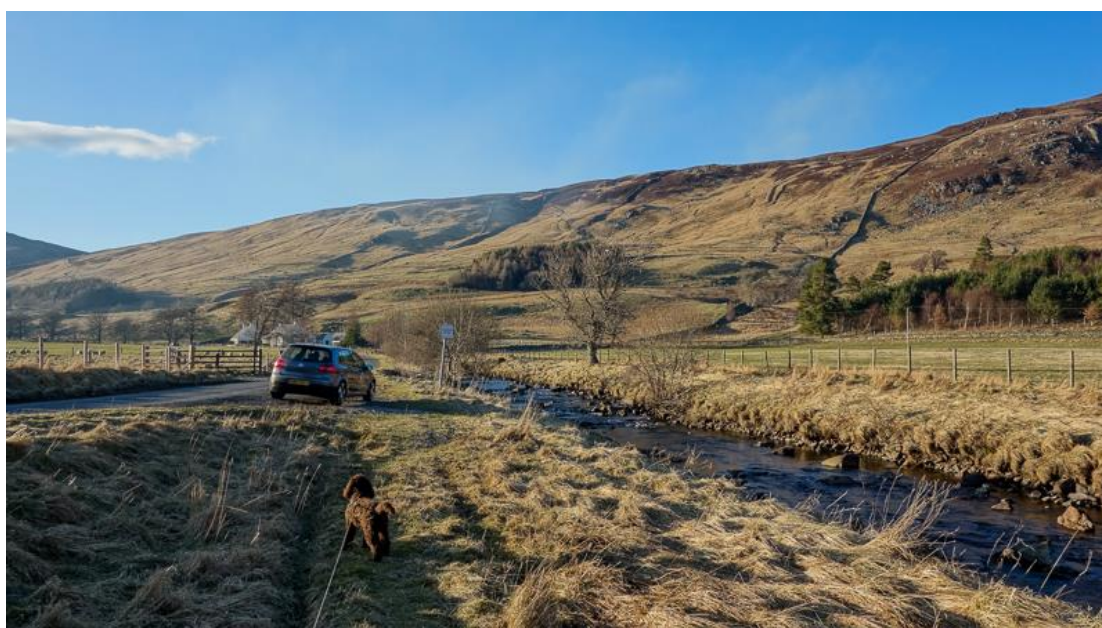
While she was busy I thought I'd set up my Go-Pro to video the drive along the Perthshire Tourist Route when we got there. Wendy ended up getting very bored and annoyed that it was taking so long but eventually I had it ready and we were on the move again. Going through the hills in New Galloway we had a **Meadow Pipit** and a **Pied Wagtail** on some wires above a field. By the time we'd got to South Lanarkshire it was 2.55pm and 11c and we spotted some **Curlew** in a field and I noticed the very rude looking stand of trees on a hill to our right. To my surprise Wendy chirped up with (not in these exact words but you'll get my drift), "Oh yeah that's the phallic shaped forest that people take selfies with as a background." What the? Trust her to know about it though.....Hahahahaha! We saw nothing else apart from a **Magpie** flying over the road driving past Glasgow and a Para glider near Stirling Castle until we reached the Perthshire Tourist Route at 4.04pm.

As always it was a scenic drive but there was only the tiniest dusting of snow left on the tops. We hoped to see Short-eared Owls out hunting, as we normally do there but despite a thorough scan we couldn't pull one out. The best we came up with was 2 more Red Kites, like we hadn't already OD'd on Red Kites already! When we hit Crieff Wendy spotted a hot air balloon floating over the town, which looked very nice.



Ballooning over Creiff

A **Red Grouse** flew over the road before we'd even got to our next location where we'd expected to see them. It was 4.39pm when we got to Amulree Road and I pulled into a scenic layby so that Lyca could have a wee and a drink after hours of being cooped up in the car.



Amulree Road

There were Red Grouse and 3x **Red-legged Partridge** but no sign of the Black Grouse we'd hoped for, which wasn't a surprise at all. We fail to see them every time we go there but it doesn't stop us trying though! Wendy was in need of WC break by then and was totally envious of Lyca, so our next stop was the Kenmore Hotel. We set off again at 5.38pm just wishing that the rest of the journey would be over soon. They say you should be careful what you wish for and our wish almost came true but not in the way we intended. My heart nearly jumped out of my mouth when some idiot came hurtling around a corner way too fast and so far over the white line that he nearly crashed straight into us! He wasn't pulling in for anything, so I had to swerve towards the curb to avoid a head on collision.....Grrrrrrrr! Realising that our holiday had just nearly come to an abrupt end before we'd even reached our destination we carried on feeling

slightly anxious. We couldn't resist stopping off for another scenic photo looking back down the valley from where we'd come from.



Nice :)

When I turned round to get in the car I spotted a Red Grouse on a post close to the car, so grabbed my gear and got a shot.



Red Grouse

After that we completed the Amulree Road and stopped in Kenmore for Wendy to have a toilet break.



Kenmore

Kenmore is always absolutely packed with Tourists but I can never work out why, it's in the middle of nowhere....Weird! With Wendy happy again we carried on.

Time was certainly passing by slowly but when we found ourselves driving through Aberfeldy we finally felt as though we were getting nearer. The Co-op we'd stopped off at to get some food for tea a couple of years ago wasn't where it should've been but further down the road we found it had been relocated in another building. There were no scummy looking kids with alcopops standing outside this time but we didn't need to go in because we'd come prepared.....well kind of.

It was 6.10pm when we let out a cheer at seeing the 'Cairngorm National Park' sign and we could start to relax a bit. The light started to fade shortly after at 6.17pm as we started to head into cloud and snow topped mountains. We spotted a herd of **Red Deer** on a hill and wished that it'd stay light for the rest of the journey so that we could appreciate the scenery. It of course didn't and was completely dark when we started to follow the signs for Aviemore, although it didn't make anything any less exciting. We couldn't wait to see what the house was like and had very high expectations but we couldn't help having a niggling feeling that it wouldn't be as nice as what it looked like on the website. As it was completely dark when we drove into Boat of Garten we had a problem as we turned off and drove down the road to find our HQ for the week. The directions we'd been given said that it was opposite a house with a tin roof but it was so dark we couldn't see what kind of roof any of the houses had.....Uh oh! We kept our eyes peeled anyway and I told Wendy the name of the house, which was next door. As luck would have it we were right next to the house so we guessed we were next. A quick look at the name on the gate in the headlights confirmed "Mallachie" so we'd found it finally....Phew! I got the key from the key safe and drove up the drive to be greeted by fairy lights in the cosy looking conservatory, which impressed Wendy, no end.

I parked up in the drive at 7.13pm with difficulty due to the fact that I couldn't see in the dark how much room I had before I hit one of the dangerously low walls. Wendy bailed out of the car and we held our breath as I opened the front door and took our 1st look inside. The 1st thing we noticed was how warm it was, which is always a good start but then we saw how immaculately clean the place

was. Everything, even the carpets, looked new and I think we were only the 5th guests to have stayed there. What if it rained all week and Lyca got caked in mud? Luckily we had the blankets from the boat and Wendy quickly covered the pale coloured settee up to avoid any accidents. There was a welcome pack of tea bags, ground coffee, a pint of milk in the fridge and in a cake tin was some delicious looking homemade Rocky Road squares!!!! WOOO HOOOOO :). It was such a shame that they had marshmallow in them as Wendy wouldn't be able to have any, so I'd have to scoff the lot myself.....Om nom nom :). The house was amazing and we couldn't believe our luck at finding such a lovely place :). I started to bring all the gear in from the outside whilst Wendy did a tour of the house before she started to unpack and put all our stuff away. Lyca meanwhile was pooped from the journey and was sound asleep on the floor in the living room. When that was all done it was definitely teatime and we'd gone prepared (ahem) with a tin of soup each in case of emergencies. We both had a feeling it was going to be anything but gourmet and I reckoned I'd be better off waiting for Tesco between 8-9pm. Wendy twisted my arm in the end saying it'd do the job because I could be waiting a long time, so she heated them up and we both sat down at the humungous table and started to eat.....Bleurrghhh! Neither of us were what could be described as impressed and although Wendy struggled her way through most of hers I ended up leaving mine.

At 8pm on the dot the Tesco van pulled up outside and I grabbed our shopping while Lyca barked behind the door. I asked the driver where he'd come from and was shocked to find out that he'd come from the store in Inverness and they deliver as far out as Newtonmore! Surely there's no profit in that? I gave him a hand to back down the drive with my amazing new ultra bright torch, as it was tricky because it was so dark, which he seemed grateful of. Once the shopping had been put away I couldn't be bothered cooking anything after all so I put a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. A couple of minutes later and we could smell burning and I quickly popped my black toast up.....Urrghhhh! Wendy laughed at my amazing cooking skills and said, "Make some more it's not hard!" but I couldn't be bothered and just ate it anyway :). The whole place stank of burnt toast so I opened the window in the kitchen to try and get rid of it and luckily the smoke alarm didn't go off.....Phewww! Wendy found a couple of Moths on the window, one was a micro but the other was a carpet type, so I went outside to get a pic to ID it with. While I was out there I could see a few fully stocked bird feeders with peanuts and there was also a squirrel feeder, so couldn't wait to see what they had in store for us in the morning. A quick look at the pic and I confirmed the Moth to be nothing more interesting than an Early Tooth-striped.

After that Wendy went off to have a shower in the en-suite but as she didn't want to wash her hair she was trying to work out how to use just the removable showerhead instead of the rain head on the ceiling. There didn't seem to be a way round it and we tried everything but there was no water coming out, so she had to go upstairs to run a bath instead. When she grabbed some stuff from the cupboard under the sink she discovered that there must've been a leak in the U-bend, as the shelf had water on it. When she'd finished her bath she came back down and it was my turn. The sides of the bath were soooooooooo deep as well as steep that I nearly dislocated my shoulder trying to haul myself out of it.....Ouch!

With all our chores completed we finally had the chance to sit down in the living room to relax and watch some TV. The house was still lovely and warm and Lyca was flat out on the floor snoring, which sounded very much like a distant booming Bittern. After a very long day we packed up and headed off to get ready

for bed. As we did Wendy checked out the central heating system and we were both horrified to see that it was storage heaters.....Noooooooooooo! After our experience in the cottage on our Dumfries and Galloway trip we'd sworn to NEVER stay anywhere with them again. Our hearts sank but we were still warm and crossed our fingers that we wouldn't have any problems to ruin our stay in such a lovely house. Nevertheless I think we all went out like lights as soon as our heads hit the pillows, even though the pillows were WAY too fat!

Sunday 20th March

At 6.45am we were all awake, albeit with sore necks from the pillows, and dying to check out the garden to see what we had coming to the feeders. We'd both woken up at 3.40am and had felt better then than we did after more sleep. It was an overcast morning and there was no wind but the house was still nice and warm, so we couldn't complain about the heating system at all :). Maybe we'd even become storage heater converts? Wendy put the kettle on and heated up some milk for her cappuccino and we looked out of the window to see what was about. The feeders were busy with a **Robin**, a **Dunnock** feeding on the ground **Greenfinches**, **Coal Tits**, **Great Tits**, **Blue Tits**, **Siskins** and **Chaffinches** but we quickly got the feeling that there'd be no Cresties. I was putting my coat on to take Lyca out for a wee when Wendy squealed, "**Yellowhammer!**" I came running over to the window and sure enough, feeding on the ground was a bright yellow Yellowhammer :). It's horrible to think that these beautiful birds are probably now extinct on the island :(I took Lyca out on her lead, as it seemed like too much trouble to open and shut the gate at the bottom of the drive every time we went in and out, so for us lazy people it wasn't dog proof. It was pretty chilly out there and I could hear a **Great-spotted Woodpecker** drumming in the woods. I grabbed a photo of the cottage seeing as it was the 1st time I'd seen it in daylight. It looked very nice along with the patio and garden.



Mallachie

I didn't stay out for long and brought Lyca back inside just in time to hear Wendy cursing loudly. She'd been so preoccupied with looking out of the window while she was frothing the milk for her cappuccino that she'd managed to spray it all over the place! It was all over the window, the shiny kettle, the gleaming tiles and draining board.....Doh! After having to spend the next 10 minutes cleaning it all up she wasn't in a good mood. I started to get my breakfast ready and feeling a bit disappointed said, "I don't think we're gonna get any Red Squirrels,

do you?" I wandered over to the table and sat down to eat it but quickly jumped out of my seat when Wendy shrieked, "**Red Squirrel!**" She'd seen it jumping between trees and luckily I was just in time to see it before it ran off. Nice :). All we needed now was to coax it into the garden, so after breakfast I went out with some hazelnuts and put them near the feeders.

After that we got ready to go out with our plan being to do our local walk for the 1st time ever. Normally we never get round to doing any walks near the cottage we are staying at, as we always go further afield but seeing as there was a gate in the garden which went straight into Boat of Garten woods it seemed like the best place to start. I'd also checked the maps and found a nice loop walk incorporating the River Spey into it. It also meant that Wendy didn't have to make sarnies, as we'd be home by lunchtime and could eat at the house for a change. While I was milling about with one eye still on the kitchen window I saw a large bird flying low through the trees. I got a bit excited by it and started to think Goshawk or Caper, so we stood at the window waiting for it to show again. Wendy, who wasn't convinced by my predictions was highly amused when a Buzzard lifted off from a tree and disappeared into the woods.....close! There was still no sign of any Cresties coming to the garden and we resigned ourselves to the fact that it just wasn't going to happen. The trees just didn't look right but we added **Blackbird** and **Pheasant** to our garden list before heading out at 8.55am.

As we were going through the garden gate Wendy heard **Crossbill** flying over and we followed the path through the trees. This walk was going to take us through the woods to Loch Vaa and then loop back to the house via the river and looked like it'd be about 4 miles. We didn't exactly feel very energetic to start with after the day before but luckily we soon found our 2nd wind. We stopped for a few minutes to chat to a lovely Scottish lady who was out walking her 2 rescue dogs before carrying on to the feeders where we'd had Cresties in the past. The wooden Caper sculpture was still there but to our horror there were no feeders up :O!



The closest thing to a Caper we were going to see?

This didn't stop us from picking up on the unmistakable calls of **Crested Tit** though but they were so high up we couldn't see them for toffee. There was no point hanging around, so we turned down the path on our left and carried on to an area we'd never walked before. It was so quiet down this section that you could've heard a pin drop but looking around I spotted a Deer lying down on the

ground. I showed it to Wendy who noticed that it was a young one, probably lying low awaiting its parent's return. A Crossbill flew over and we carried on until we reached a more open area where we picked up on a Tit flock.



They're in here somewhere

They were miles away and viewing them even with bins was impossible. We could hear Cresties but again we couldn't see them and to add insult to injury they were moving further away and not closer. I found the turn off leading to Loch Vaa and although it was a diversion, which added more to our walk I wanted to check it out for future reference. We'd only ever viewed it from the road before but I'd since learned that it was a good spot for Dragonflies and had earmarked it for our June trip. When we got to the Loch it was a lovely sight and with the water being so calm the reflections were pretty impressive.



Loch Vaa

We had a quick scan and found a pair of Goosanders and some Goldeneye but that was about it. There was a hide there but the boardwalk was under water, so we couldn't get to it. Not that we needed to, as there was nothing about!



Flooded hide

We started to head off when we saw a guy with a black Labrador coming down the path and knowing how much Lyca hates black Labs we hung back. It turned out that she wasn't too bothered by him at all and we even stopped for a chat with the bloke.

After that we carried on but all of a sudden I discovered that I had dog poo on my glove :O! I was totally grossed out and slightly bemused as to where it'd come from especially when I found more on the sleeve of my coat. All Wendy could think was that somehow I'd done it when I'd picked it up earlier. She made a lot of, "Ewwwwwwww!" noises and then kindly pointed out that I'd been using the map on my phone a lot so it must be on that too! I tried to pass her Lyca's lead so I could have a better look but she was looking at it like it had the plague of something and was having none of it, for obvious reasons. After checking the lead thoroughly and reckoning it was clean I finally handed it over but nothing could prepare me for what I found next. The poo bag, which had been hanging off the holder attached to Lyca's Flexi-lead since shortly after we'd left the house, had a huge tear in it and had rubbed poo all over my trouser leg and the bottom of my coat :O! By this point Wendy, being as sympathetic as ever, had tears rolling down her cheeks and couldn't move for laughing, so there was only one thing for it and that was to join in.....or cry! Had I been caked in poo the whole time we'd been talking to the bloke with the black Lab? God knows what he was thinking if I had and it just didn't bear thinking about! After we'd resumed some kind of sanity Wendy told me that as soon as we got home I'd have to take everything off and put it in the wash. Urrghhhhhh and on our 1st day too! Lyca, was blissfully unaware of the mess she'd created (quite literally) and was just sitting there looking at us as though butter wouldn't melt! Dogs!

Covered in poo or not we still needed to get going and we set off again with me hoping we didn't meet anyone else. We were now on a Farm track walking past fields of sheep and Wendy wasn't convinced that I knew where I was going (I didn't by the way). While I checked the map on my phone she spotted a large flock of Thrushes. Initially it looked as though they were all Fieldfare but luckily there were a few **Redwing** amongst them. The track was never ending and it looked as though we were going to be walking straight through the Farm at the bottom but there was nobody, but more to the point no animals about, so we upped the pace. I was really hoping I'd read the map correctly as there was no

public footpath signs anywhere.....Gulp! In one of the fields was a small Loch, so we stopped for a scan of it and added **Little Grebe** to our list.



Farm Loch

We scuttled our way past the Farm buildings half expecting to find a herd of cows or an angry Farmer telling us to get off his land or something but we got through without a hitch. Unsure as to which way to go next I had to enlist the help of my trusty phone app again and found out which path we needed to go on. One route would've made the walk a lot longer but the one we wanted incorporated the river into our walk.



River Spey

We spotted the Farmer down by the river getting out of a 4x4, so when we got down there I thought I'd be clever and approach him acting dumb before he could shout at us. I innocently asked him how to get back to Boat of Garten and luckily he was very helpful and just as I'd hoped he told us to just follow the river.....Phew! We went through the gate and followed the river seeing a couple more Goosanders and 5x Goldeneye.



Home straight?

I thought I'd attempt a shot of one of the Goosanders and slowly made my way closer to it behind a tree. This worked a treat but the bird was still too far away for anything decent, so I edged my way a bit closer and the bird flew off up river. I'd managed nothing more than a really bad record shot, so I came back feeling a bit deflated.



Goosander

Finally we turned off the path and were heading towards the Woods, which would take us back to the garden gate. We were pretty knackered by then and couldn't wait to get back for some food and a drink. As we wandered through the trees Wendy all of a sudden shrieked. "Dog poo!" quickly followed by, "OMG you just stood in it!" I couldn't believe it! Not only were my clothes covered in it but now my shoe was as well.....Aaaarrghhhh! That was the icing on cake for me and I cursed my way back scraping my boot on just about every tuft of grass available. Caked in poo or not, my map reading skills had been spot on though and the path came out on the road we were staying on! Skillzzzz :P.

Eventually we arrived back at the house at 12.25pm and obviously I had to take my trousers and coat off in the utility room before I was allowed in. Wendy went straight in and put the kettle on and then started making our lunch. After my disaster earlier I had to laugh when she managed to spray milk all over the place

for the 2nd time that day. Yet again she'd been preoccupied with what was outside and wasn't concentrating on what she was doing.....Doh! A quick check of my phone told me that our walk had been 6.6 miles and we'd done 17,500 steps already. I'd slightly underestimated as usual, so it was no wonder we were hungry.....Ooops! While we waited for the washing, Wendy rustled herself up a big pan of some kind of veggie concoction to keep her going for the week. It was quite nice being able to relax at HQ for a bit before going out again and it made a change not having to eat lunch in the car. To top it all off nicely was the Rocky road I had for my pudding!!



Homemade Rocky Road

When Wendy was doing some dishes she spotted the Yellowhammer again and a **Treecreeper** in the garden and called me to come and see it. By the time I'd got there it'd gone but it was still a nice garden tick to have. A Woodpigeon was about as exciting as it got after that and the washing was taking far too long so after waiting for 2 hours we got sick of it at and decided to go out anyway. Seeing as it was relatively nearby and wasn't windy we thought we'd strike while the iron was hot and give Findhorn Valley a shot for Eagles. We knew that the wind was forecast to pick up later in the week so it made sense to go there sooner rather than later. Luckily I had some suitably warm alternative clothes to wear until my other stuff was ready and we reckoned that after our active start to the day we needed something a bit more sedate to fill the afternoon.

We left HQ at 2.30pm and were driving towards the narrow winding road to Findhorn Valley before we knew it. It was 2.55pm when we entered the valley and there was still some snow on the riverbanks and also on the hilltops where there was also a herd of **Red Deer**. We looked at every bridge we passed for Dipper but apart from a **Grey Wagtail** there was nothing else. The **Wild Goats** were hanging around on the scree in their usual spot at the side of the road, so we stopped for a quick pic.



Wild Goat

There were no fallen trees this time around and no holdups but we did come round a corner to find a 4x4 stopped in the middle of the road and on the brow of hill. This seemed the craziest place to choose to stop and we wondered what the problem was but as I swerved round him I noticed that he was rolling himself a cigarette! Hardly an emergency in the grand scheme of things really....Idiot! Scanning the sky above the hills we spotted a large bird up in the thermals and stopped to check it out. Our excitement quickly died a death when we saw that it was just a Common Buzzard as were every single bird we got our bins on! It was really frustrating to see Buzzard after Buzzard after Buzzard but obviously they're doing well in the area, so we couldn't grumble too much. I'm sure the next time we go there the gamekeepers will have made sure they're all gone (illegally).....Grrrrr! This wasn't what we were there for though, so we kept looking as I parked up in the last space in the full car park. It looked as though there was a large Bird Tours group up ahead of us at the viewing spot and they were all looking up with their bins and scopes. This looked promising, so we had a look too only to find our 4 Buzzards doing great Eagle impressions.....Urrghhhh! We walked down towards them and stood next to the group for a scan. The Tour Guide was friendly said, "Hello" and then told us that they'd been watching 4x Goldies but that they'd disappeared behind the hills at the head of the valley about 1 minute ago. Typical! He was wearing a Grant Arms jacket, so he was obviously one of their Tour Guides and he bore an uncanny resemblance to the guy who'd been working at the Pine Marten Hide we went to on our 1st visit up to Scotland. They all headed back to their cars, there was no mini bus, as you'd expect, so apparently you had to drive yourself to all the locations! We thought we'd carry on up the path to see if we'd have any joy further up in the valley but every time we thought we were onto something it turned out to be just another Buzzard!



Findhorn

While 'Hawk eyed' Wendy was scanning the vast expanse of scree she managed to pull out a tiny white speck, which was a completely white **Mountain Hare**. Not wanting to give up we said we'd go as far as the bridge and if we still hadn't seen anything we'd turn back. When we got there we continued to scan desperately but there was still nothing and Wendy was beginning to get very cold standing around.



Last chance saloon

Findhorn is always hit and miss and it was looking as though this time was a definite miss but we could always try again later in the week. Just as we were thinking of leaving Wendy spotted a large bird high above the furthest hills in the distance. This was looking good but it was way too far off to be 100% sure, so I took a record shot before it disappeared behind the hill and zoomed in on it. It was just too far away even for the 2000mm of the P900 to have picked up any of its features but going by its shape as well as where it was we were 99% convinced. We waited for a few minutes to see if it'd reappear but typically it didn't and was probably miles away by then. We were anything but thrilled to have had such poor views though and it didn't feel as though we could even count it but we'd sort of added **Golden Eagle** to our list before we left. As we

walked back Wendy also picked out some Red Grouse right up on the snowy summits but we didn't hang about because it really was freezing. Even on the calmest and sunniest day there's a biting wind, which blows through the valley to take the pleasure aspect out of being in such a dramatic looking place.

Back at the car I had a quick look to see how many steps we were on and was blown away to see that we'd done 24,800 and it was only our 1st day :O! We reckoned we had no chance of maintaining that kind of stamina for the entire week and that we'd struggle to even get close to it again but we were certainly feeling the effects. Wendy spotted another Mountain Hare on the other side of the valley half way up a mountain, so seeing as I'd come away with absolutely no pics I took a record shot with the P900 to see how it'd cope. I think it did quite well considering how far away it was!



Mountain Hare

Driving back we stopped when we spotted 3 large birds but of course they were all just Buzzards, which were joined by a Raven. All we could think was that if I hadn't got caked in dog poo earlier the chances are we'd have been there much earlier when the Tour Guide had seen the 3 Golden Eagles! That's just the story of our lives though, right place, wrong time :(On the way back to HQ we had a nice **Brown Hare** in one of the fields at the side of the road and when I got to the sign for Carrbridge I wondered why we had to go through there to get back. I reckoned that if I ignored the sat nav we'd home much quicker, so I carried on along the A9. Clever me :). Unfortunately I ended up in Aviemore and my brainstorm ended up adding 2 minutes onto our journey but you live and learn don't you?

I parked up outside HQ at 5.45pm and after our very long day we set about making tea, after Lyca had eaten hers of course. Wendy's was a very simple affair of heating up what she'd made earlier up in the microwave, so she was sorted in no time. Mine had to be cooked in the oven and I was very impressed with my skills after not melting the plastic tray this time. We'd burned 1,500kcal on the walks and done 12 miles in total, so I reckoned I deserved another piece of homemade Rocky Road :P. Wendy hung all my wet washing up in the hope that it'd be dry by the morning and the house was so warm it looked as though it might just be possible. After tea Wendy wanted to go to The Boat

Hotel for a drink and to check out the menu for future reference but I was far too tired to be bothered, so she went off for a soak in the very deep bath. When Wendy went to put the dishwasher on for the 1st time since arriving she couldn't get it to work, so thinking she was just being her usual stupid self I had a go. I couldn't get it going either, so after we'd tried just about everything, including searching high and low for the manual, I reluctantly sent an email to the contact for the cottage, which in this case was listed as the cleaners, for some advice. Within ½ hour we had a reply (pretty impressive considering it was the evening) and were told that we had to really slam the door shut for it to work. Feeling slightly stupid I gave it a go and the thing instantly kicked into action.....Doh! Lyca spent the entire evening panned out on the floor, except for asking for her yogurt at 10pm. I put the camera trap out and smeared some peanut butter on a branch to see what we could lure in but by 10.30pm we were dropping off a cliff and headed to bed for a well deserved sleep.

Monday 21st March

Call us slackers but it was 8am when we all woke up and we'd slept for longer than we'd expected. Lyca had woken us both up at 6am but we'd ignored her and she'd gone back to sleep.....Phew! We'd already decided the night before that we were going to take it a bit easy, so we could recover from the past 2 days. It was another overcast start to the day but again there was no wind, so it was lovely and calm when I took Lyca out for a wee. I brought the camera trap in and had a look at the footage only to find absolutely nothing! Lyca wasn't remotely interested in her breakfast and just turned her nose up at it, so it seemed as though she was too tired to care.



Zzzzzzzzz

Wendy sat down with her cappuccino and instantly screwed her face up in disgust and wondered how on earth she hadn't noticed it yesterday. The tap water at the house tasted so strongly of chemicals that it was tainting the flavour of everything, so from then on it was bottled water going into the kettle and nothing else! Lyca eventually ate her breakfast and Wendy started making our sarnies for the day ahead. She had one eye on the garden but was gutted that there was no sign of any Squirrels.

It was 9.35am when we left HQ and before anything else we stopped at the local Post Office to stock up on bird food. Seeing as we were on holiday we kept up

our tradition and bought a freshly baked pain au chocolat, which we ate down the road in the layby at the feeding station. We left Lyca in the car, as we'd already got the impression that we weren't going to be long. Going by what we'd already seen we weren't hopeful at all as we wandered down to the feeders. We looked at the pool over the road hoping for a white winged Gull but the only birds of note were 3x Whopper Swan and 2x Little Grebe. At the feeders it was really quiet to start with and there wasn't even any common birds around. It was, yet again too mild for anything to be coming to feeders and being easy to see. Luckily we did spot a lovely Red Squirrel, which scampered its way over to the peanuts. Obviously we didn't want a picture of it on the feeder, so when it jumped onto the ground for a split second it enabled us to both get a shot. It was so dark in the woods that we were anything but happy with what we got but they brushed up OK.



Red Squirrel

It didn't stick around for very long at all and had vanished back into the woods before we knew it and to top it all off we couldn't even hear Cresties calling never mind see any. We headed back to the car feeling disappointed and needing a Crestie fix I drove straight to the Loch Garten feeders hoping for some better luck there.

It was 10.13am when I pulled up in the car park and we were both shocked to find that there were no feeders out!!! Usually there are loads of massive ones hanging up in various different places, which we presume were supplied by the RSPB. We've no idea why they've been taken down but luckily I had a peanut feeder in the boot, so I hung it up on a nearby branch. I got into the back seat and we sat poised and waiting for something or anything to happen. It wasn't long until we had a million Chaffinches feeding frantically on the ground and we realized that someone had been there before us and had left some seed for the birds. It wasn't long before there were birds everywhere and we started firing off shots of Coal Tits, Great Tits and the odd Chaffinch and they certainly weren't shy.



Coal Tit

They're obviously used to Photographers putting food out and also being very close to them. A Great-spotted Woodpecker flew in, which added a bit of interest as well as frustration when it kept its distance and stayed on the tree trunks just that little bit too far away. Again we couldn't hear any Cresties and none had come down to the feeders, so I gave up and took the feeder down, so we could leave. We felt very guilty at taking the food away from them after seeing how much they'd all enjoyed it but we hoped that someone else would be along soon to do the same. I ended up scattering some sunflower hearts on the ground for them to tide them over as compensation. I was just about to drive off when Wendy suddenly blurted out, "**** is that a Crestie?" I could tell by the tone in her voice that she meant it but the bird had flown onto the ground straight behind a mound, so she couldn't see it. It had joined the Chaffinches eating the sunflower hearts, so it was just a case of waiting until it popped out again. Luckily it did and we confirmed Crestie, which we were very happy about. Being so fired up and just wanting to see the bird we, of course, weren't prepared and our cameras were in the back of the car. I tried to grab them as quickly as I could but while I was doing so it hopped up onto the tree right in front of Wendy.....Aarrghhhhhh! I couldn't move quick enough and our hearts were racing but typically it flew off before we were ready :(There was only one thing for it and that was to put the feeder back up and wait until it hopefully came back. We waited and waited but there was no sign of it again but the Woodpecker came back, so we got some shots of that instead.



Great-spotted Woodpecker

Spring was definitely in the air though and we watched a pair Coal Tits frantically chasing each other all over the place until they actually started mating! It looked as though we'd had our tantalizingly brief encounter with a Crestie for the day and at 11.12pm we drove away feeling disappointed. Thinking about where we could try next I reckoned the feeders we'd found at Nethybridge last year were worth a shot, so that was our next plan sorted.

It was already 11.19am when I parked up in the layby and we all wandered up the road towards Dell Woods. As we approached the feeders we could see a couple of people there already and our hearts sank. It was a Pro looking Photographer and his wife who luckily were very friendly and good company. They were staying up there for 2 weeks, so we couldn't help but wish we were too. His wife was totally taken by Lyca who was loving in all the attention but when she told us that they'd had to have their dog put to sleep just 4 days ago we felt so bad for her. She said that she didn't really feel up to the holiday but they'd gone anyway, although it wasn't the same without the dog :(Our hearts went out to them completely but she did say that they were already looking for another to hopefully fill the void. While nothing was happening at the feeders we talked for ages and got some great info from the bloke including the phone number for a guy who lets people into his garden to see Badgers. When the topic turned to Norfolk they made us very envious when they said that they knew the Cley warden and that when he goes away on holiday they look after his house, free of charge, for him a couple of times a year. Talk about lucky! We exchanged mobile numbers in case any of us found anything interesting and by that point Lyca was being very rude and was winging to go. After telling him what we planned to do tomorrow he laughed and said he'd probably see us there, as that was his plan too. We made our excuses and were just about to set off when the woman spotted a Crestie, which landed on the feeder. Her husband grabbed his camera and stealthily made his way closer and fired off a load of shots. We hung back crossing our fingers that it'd go up onto a branch and stick around for a

while. After he'd got enough shots he turned and said I could approach. I really didn't want to as I knew my luck but he said it will be ok, so I used a tree between me and the Crestie and slowly crept forward. After a few steps I stopped to make sure it wasn't spooked, which it wasn't....Phew! The pressure was on to show this Pro I had some fieldcraft skills but I'd be very worried if I didn't considering I've been doing it for 13 years! As I went to make my next step it flew off.....NOOOOOOOO! I felt pretty rubbish but the bloke said, "Nah that wasn't your fault at all, don't worry." That made me feel slightly better but not much because I absolutely hate it when a bird flies and I think it could be my fault. I trudged back to Wendy and I think she picked up on my depressedness so suggested we continue on our walk so I didn't have time to wallow.

We carried on through the woods hearing no more Cresties and found the place where we'd gone wrong last time. I made sure we were going the right way this time though and the walk finally took us down to the river where we hoped to find a Dipper.



Dipper spot

It came as no surprise to us that there wasn't one along the entire stretch back to the road.....Boooooooo! After making use of the Nethybridge WC's we were back at the car by 1.03pm having done a feeble 5,700 steps in comparison to the day before. It was lunchtime, so the plan was to go back to Loch Garten feeders to eat our sarnies while keeping our eyes peeled for Cresties.

When we got there I parked up in my usual spot and a minute later a guy appeared behind us. He walked up to my window and very politely asked could he set up some feeders to get some photos. I thought this was very nice to ask as they weren't our feeders so I said, "Yes go ahead, of course." He started setting up some branches for photography and put what looked like crushed up fat balls in the top of a trunk. We stayed put and ate our lunch while he rearranged the set up. It was funny to watch him toing and froing with the birds seemingly totally unfazed and carrying on feeding as if he wasn't there.



Photo shoot

After we'd eaten it was 1.34pm and we hadn't had any sight or sound of the Crestie coming back, so we left him and his mate to crack on without my car in their way.

Wendy wanted to nip into Aviemore to the shop where we'd bought our amazingly warm "Heat Holders' socks and I needed to get petrol, so that was our next plan. A Helicopter was flying above the mountains around a Loch on our way and when I parked up outside the shop it had followed us into Aviemore. Hopefully it was just on an exercise and wasn't rescuing anyone from the mountains.



Coastguard Helicopter

Although my car was saying that it was 10.5c it looked very much like it was going to rain but that didn't matter too much because we were heading to Lochindorb and weren't planning on any walks anyway. When Wendy had stocked up on socks and had a look round the poncy shop next door I drove up to the garage and filled my petrol tank. A few minutes later when we'd got to Carrbridge it started to rain, so it looked like our plan was a good one and we

couldn't have timed it better. By the time we were up in the moors and looking down on Lochindorb some of the sky had turned blue again, which was handy.



Looking down on Lochindorb

We quickly started to spot Red Grouse flying around in pairs and calling to each other, so we got our cameras ready. With the sun out we stood a good chance of getting some decent shots and when we found a suitably close candidate posing nicely on top of some heather we stopped. Obviously as soon as we pulled up it moved further away but that's just bog standard and to be expected!



Red Grouse

Yet again it was a lovely place to be and we admired the view with no other sounds to spoil the peace than those of the Red Grouse. The silence was broken by 3 trucks, which drove past us and parked up in a layby further down the road. We didn't think much of it until I spotted 3 x blokes ploughing straight through the heather where all the Grouse were with their Spaniels and Labradors. This could only mean one thing and that was Gamekeepers!



Gamekeepers

The shooting season was closed, so we checked them in our bins and they didn't have any guns on them, so we breathed a sigh of relief. We can't imagine how horrible it must be to be there in shooting season and if we ever were it'd be by unfortunate mistake! :(I drove down to view the Loch and had a scan of the water but it was totally dead. It was too early for the Divers to be back, so I let Lyca out for a wee and she pulled me all the way over to the water for a drink. She definitely knew what she was doing and it was like she remembered it from last year.



Lochindorb

We didn't see the point in hanging around after she'd guzzled ½ the Loch we set off again.

Driving through Grantown-on-Spey my eyes lit up when I saw the 'Golden Grantown' Chinese. I'd never known about any take-aways on previous trips, so I made a mental note about that one for future reference. When we were nearly home I remembered that I hadn't picked up the poo bag I'd put by the car when we'd been at Dell Woods that morning.....Oooooops! A lot of people would've just left it but our consciences wouldn't let us ignore it and we had to go back. I

really hoped that it hadn't been driven over a few times and burst because I'd already had enough of that particular pleasure! First of all we stopped at The Heather Centre for more bird food and had a look round for pressies. I found a beast of a feeder, which I reckoned would stop me having to fill the feeders at up every day at home. Surely they couldn't get through all that so quickly? I bought it, hoping that there was enough room in the car to bring it home :P. When we got back to Nethybridge we found the poo bag, which was still intact exactly where I'd put it.....Phew! Having retrieved the bag and put it in a nearby bin we headed for home.

It was only 4.35pm when we got back to HQ, so I set about filling feeders up and finding a suitable branch to set up next to them.



Back garden

After we'd all had tea we headed out at 6pm to the Boat Hotel, for a recce of the menu. We decided to walk there because it was only down the road but in reality it was much further away than we'd thought.....Doh. It was a pretty chilly evening too, so we were pleased when we finally got there about 20 minutes later. Wendy went in 1st and asked at reception if Lyca could go in and she was told by the very friendly bloke, "Of course, we are very dog friendly here." After Lyca had gone up on her back legs and danced at him we took her into the bar and sat down at a table hoping she'd calm down.

We were relieved that it was lovely and warm in there and Wendy went to the bar to order our drinks and get a menu to look at. While she waited to be served she overheard a young guy, who sounded like he was Portuguese or something, telling the bar staff about Ospreys. The staff seemed anything but interested but he exuded enthusiasm and was happy to carry on whilst being met with their blank expressions. He then sat at a table on his own with a rucksack and proceeded to write postcards and take selfies. The rest of the clientele were more elderly and most of them if not all of them were staying as guests in the Hotel. It was really quiet and chilled out in the bar with a real old school feel to it with well spaced tables, dark wood and a roaring fire, which I really liked. After checking out the menu and finding that there was something for both of us we decided we'd give it a whirl the following night. When we left Wendy went back to reception to ask if it'd be a good idea to book a table for tomorrow night. The bloke said, "Oh definitely, Tuesdays are our Fish and Chip night and it'll be bonkers!" She booked us a table for 5.30pm and we started to walk back up the

never-ending road to HQ, wondering what Fish and Chip night was all about. We started to worry that it meant that they literally only served Fish and Chips and we wouldn't be able to order off the normal menu or that it was going to be so busy it was unpleasant. We couldn't really see either being feasible but we'd be finding out soon enough.

We were home by 7pm and while Wendy went off for a bath I started to go through all of the days pics. I was bit concerned to find that most of them were slightly out of focus! After that I was annoyed enough without being told that I had to go for a bath too...Bah! Wendy had become obsessed with the Fox design cushions and rug and set about trying to find where she could get them for home. Typically they weren't cheap and were by a designer called Jessica Anna, so she was going to have to cough up if she wanted them that much.....Hahahahaha! The choice of viewing on TV was dire as usual but I spotted a game on the shelf called Bird Bingo, so I got it down. We reckoned it was worth a go and we had a game, which unfortunately for me Wendy won.....Boooooooooo! The house was so warm and cosy and we still couldn't believe how good the storage heaters were after saying, "Never again!" in Gatehouse of Fleet! We were hoping for a big day tomorrow, weather permitting, and by 10pm we were so tired that we packed up and went to bed in preparation.

Tuesday 22nd March

It was 6.45am when we woke up having had 7 hours and 41 minutes sleep, which we reckoned was enough to have recharged our batteries for the day ahead. It was another nice calm and sunny day, so it was all systems go for our plan to do the hardest walk of the holiday. The wind was forecast to pick up on Wednesday and last for the rest of our holiday, so if we didn't do Cairngorm today then we'd have missed our best opportunity. I went straight out to the Loch Garten feeders hoping to get some Crestie shots after failing miserably previously, while Wendy was happier to stay in to make sarnies and chill out.

I got there at 7am and apart from a couple of camper vans there was no one there. I setup the peanut feeder and jammed some fat ball into the trunk. The usual's came in 1st so I set about getting some shots. It was obviously very low light conditions in the trees making my camera use ISO10000! Suddenly, out of nowhere a Crestie landed straight on my peanut feeder! I didn't want to get a feeder shot so willed it to jump to a branch or tree. Whilst looking through my viewfinder at the Crestie I caught something out of the corner of my other eye on a nearby branch. I looked up from my camera and there was a 2nd Crestie!!! I quickly snapped my camera to that bird and fired wildly at it. Even though the high ISO has slightly taken the edge of it, I was very pleased to get my best Crestie shot ever.



Crested Tit

It then jumped onto the peanuts so I had 2 Cresties feeding on my feeder! :). After they went I stayed for a bit hoping they'd come back but they never did so I gave up and headed back.

I was back at HQ by 8.25am and Wendy told me that while she was making the lunches she seen a Red Squirrel again. It was on a mission in the woods and didn't stick around but she was very pleased to have seen it again. We packed up the car, armed with foot warmers for Wendy and headed out at 9.03am.

I stopped at Alt Mor Bridge 1st because I'd read that it was a good spot to check for Dipper but there was nothing. Next up was a desperate 'clutching at straws' look for Black Grouse at Coir na Ciste viewpoint, knowing that we didn't stand a hope in hell's chance of seeing any.



Coir na Ciste

One of these days we'll catch up with Black Grouse again but we had a sneaking suspicion it'd be highly unlikely on this trip!

By the time I'd parked up in Cairngorm car park it was 9.35am and the quietest we'd ever seen it. It was (relatively) dead!



Cairngorm car park

There wasn't much snow up there at all, so the skiing wasn't going to be as popular as it usually was when we're there. Saying that though, there was already a good few people up there on the slopes. Wendy cracked open her foot warmers and put them in her boots, as it was pretty snowy and presumably cold higher up where we were going. I'd spun round the car park to check for Snow Bunting but there was no sign of any at all, not that it was remotely cold enough for them to be still hanging around there anyway. The 1st thing on Wendy's agenda was to nip to the WC's before we set off, so I waited for her with Lyca. I'd chosen to take the rucksack up, so we were better prepared this time. I'd packed the foil emergency blanket, extra hand and foot warmers, my tele-converter, a bottle of water, a packet of 2 biscuits and 2x cereal bars, so the thing weighed a ton on my back! Wendy found it highly amusing that I'd packed the emergency blanket but it's better to be safe than sorry!

The 1st section of the walk past the ski lift was pretty slippery and for some way after but it soon became patchier. Lyca was loving the snow and was running around wagging her tail, sticking her nose in it and digging holes. She was also sporting her new hiking coat.....Very swish :).



Snow dog

It'd been a year since she'd last seen snow and she definitely liked it :). There were some completely snow free sections, which were a dream to walk on then we'd hit another section that we had to be careful on. The problem was that with it being so mild and sunny the snow was thawing and there were plenty of holes where evidently someone's leg had gone straight through. Wendy had that happen last year and although it was funny at the time it would be less amusing if she'd injured herself. Another tricky bit was where the snow was lying over a stream. We could see part of the stream, where it'd thawed, further up but we had to cross it not knowing how compacted the overlying snow was. We took it easy-ish and just hoped for the best.....Hahahahaha! By the time we'd negotiated the tricky bits it looked like the rest would be plain sailing, albeit slippery but the temperature had risen and we were boiling.



Lyca pulling me up the hill

Our hats and gloves came off and were added to the rucksack on my back, as if it wasn't already heavy enough! I took the water out and told Wendy to drink some to reduce the weight, which she didn't complain about. Next we had to unzip our coats as we climbed higher into Ptarmigan territory, where you'd think it'd be colder!

We were getting pretty tired by then and we stopped to get our breath. Wendy, who was behind me suddenly said, "Ptarmigan!" "On top of that rock, I'm sure it's one." I got directions and looked through my bins at the distant rocks to our left, where I could just about make a tiny white object perched on top. She was right though and it was indeed a **Ptarmigan** but we needed to get a lot closer than that and there were a couple walking on skis heading straight for it.....Uh oh!



Spot the birdie?

We thought we didn't stand a chance of it staying put but we walked as quickly as we could towards it hoping to beat them to it before they flushed the bird. When we were near enough I went off with Lyca towards the rocks where it was sitting and to this day I still don't know why I didn't leave Lyca with Wendy! All of a sudden the snow gave way under my foot and my leg disappeared down a hole right up to my thigh! I turned round to Wendy, who was laughing at me but luckily I was fine, so I carried on and managed to stalk my way stealthily around of the back of the rocks where I positioned myself with my camera and had the sun behind me.



Ptarmigan 1

The bird was a male and had already started to go into summer plumage and I started to fire off some shots. It wasn't in an ideal position for me but if that was all I could get then so be it. Wendy was sitting down on some rocks next to the path and was watching the bird in her bins with intent as the ski walkers approached. She watched in amusement as the bloke's ski kept coming off his boot and he had to stop to reconnect it every few steps. Equally amusing was the woman's running commentary about how dangerous it was with the snow thawing and not knowing when it was going to give way. It all looked like a bit of a palaver and sounded a touch over dramatic to Wendy. As they went past her Wendy commented to the bloke that it looked like hard work but he just looked at her and said, "No, actually it's a lot easier than walking." Wendy, however, wasn't convinced :P.



Relaxing

We were both hoping that they wouldn't flush it but all of a sudden it started to get twitchy. Unfortunately it wasn't the people that were the problem it was Lyca! She'd spotted it and was pulling on her lead to get to it and then tragedy struck and she let out a bark.....Noooooooooooo! It got up and decided to walk right in front of me and Lyca! I fired at it like a man possessed and luckily managed my best Ptarmigan shot ever.



Ptarmigan 2

Wendy was still watching it all in her bin and we both watched on as it took off and flew away.....bummer :(We couldn't think of anything other than that it was going to clear right off, way up into the mountains and away from us but we were both pleasantly surprised as to what happened next.

When the bird flew another bird, which until then had been hidden behind a rock, went with it. We had no idea that there were 2 birds and better still was that the 2nd one was still completely white. They both flew straight past Wendy and landed nearby, so I grabbed my camera and headed over as quickly as possible. I passed Lyca over to Wendy and carefully approached using a boulder as cover. This worked a treat and I was able to set my camera up on a rock, lay down in the snow and started firing.

This was more like it and Lyca had actually done me a huge favour in flushing the birds, as they were both now in a much better position.....Happy Days :). It was very nice to finally get a photo of a pure white Ptarmigan.



Ptarmigan 3

When I'd filled my boots I went over to Wendy and took over Lyca duty while she went over for a go.



Ptarmigan 4

As usual they weren't fazed by us at all and allowed us both to get some decent shots, which more than made up for last years disappointment. There'd been 3x blokes coming up who'd obviously seen us taking pics and were hanging back.



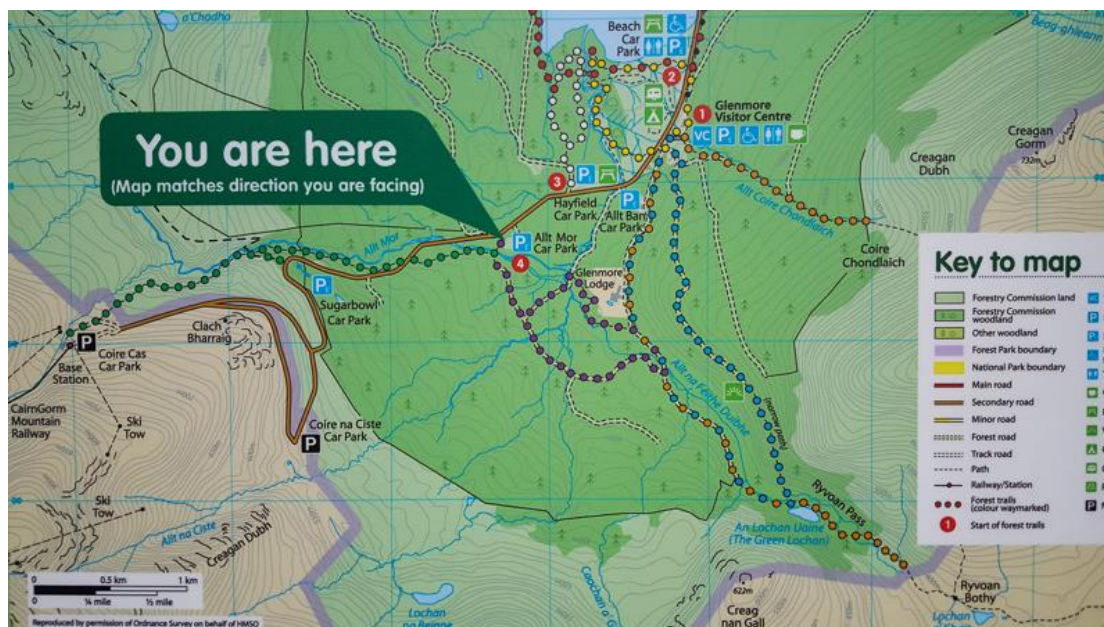
The set

This was very courteous of them but we don't think that they'd have made the slightest bit of difference. We'd both finished getting shots, so they came up to join us and one of them asked if it was OK if they came over to get some pictures. We'd finished, so they were more than welcome and the main guy started to give advice to the others about getting good shots. Again I was really impressed by how polite the photographers are in this area. It soon became apparent that the bloke giving advice was in fact Andy Howard, a well known Professional Photographer and Tour Guide who was with the 2 blokes from the Loch Garten feeders the day before. Small world! They'd obviously booked themselves onto

a week's photography course in the Highlands with him! From what we'd seen at the feeders he was certainly teaching them some good tricks, which had already rubbed off. We got chatting to him and he commented on Wendy's bins while I admired his camera, which was a Canon 1DX with a 600mmL lens :O! What I wouldn't give to have that as my set up! I was so taken by it that I jokingly asked him if I could stroke it :P. Luckily he found it funny not totally weird and let me.....Hahahahaha! He even let us both hold it to feel how heavy it was and was obviously just showing off by then :). It turned out that it was soon to be donated to his wife because he was just about to get the new 1DX mkII with a 200-400L lens :O!!!!!!

After celebrating with a biscuit each were happy to leave after that, so we made our way back down the mountain, which was a damn sight more pleasant than going up. We hadn't seen the bloke we'd met at the Nethybridge feeders, so he must've thought better of it. When we got down to the bottom Wendy nipped in to the Café for a cappuccino and came out with some veggie jelly sweets and a couple of bags of poncy Quinoa Crisps, that she remembered from last time. We were back at the car at 12.53pm and after our 14,000 steps we reckoned we'd earned our lunch. The walk had only been 3.77 miles but obviously it's all uphill for the 1st half and quite hard going but luckily we'd seen Ptarmigan quite low down again at 3,400ft, so we hadn't had to go to the top which is 4,085ft searching.....Phew! With hindsight, the base layers and foot warmers weren't necessary, not to mention the emergency blanket!

By then it was 1.19pm and we drove out of the now very busy car park and set off to a new place I'd found to explore nearby. Going past Alt Mor Bridge we had a 2nd look but it was Dipper-less again. I parked my car in Alt Mor car park at 1.30pm and we got out for a look around. I had no idea where we were going or what the area was like, so we looked at the path board, liked the look of a circular route and headed down a footpath through the trees.



Alt Mor map

We could imagine it'd be midgie heaven there in summer, which was a bit depressing due to me having bookmarked it for our June trip! Wendy commented at a dead tree that looked good for Spottfly and then said, "Crestie!" She'd seen one on a branch but it'd gone into a hole, presumably checking it out for nesting. Yet again, we weren't having any difficulty finding Crestie sites it was everything else we were struggling with. We carried on until Lyca went off

under some trees and Wendy spotted that she was eating something. She went over to see what she was doing only to find some weird looking and foul smelling poo.....Bleurrghhhh! Wendy had never seen poo like it before and looking around at the habitat she wondered if it could be Pine Marten or possibly Otter? She took a pic to try and ID it later and we carried on hoping that Lyca would have a drink from the stream.



Poo

We could hear a good few Cresties calling non-stop around us, which was great. The footpath ended abruptly at the stream and beyond that was some moorland, so I went down with Lyca to see if we could get over it to continue our walk.



Please have a drink!

Luckily Lyca did have a drink but there were no other paths, so it didn't look as though we could go any further. When Wendy went down to the stream she found some footprints in the sand, which were definitely not those of a dog or a Badger. This fuelled our suspicions furthermore and she got a pic of them too.



Footprints in the sand

We turned back when we realized we'd gone the wrong way and found the path we wanted. It took us on a walk through the woods and up a hill, which came out at Glenmore Lodge. When we'd gone there for food last year it'd been dark and we couldn't really see the building but had presumed it to be relatively small. How wrong we'd been, it was huge!



Glenmore Lodge

The walk was turning out to be longer than we'd thought (again!) and with the sun out Wendy was boiling. She was still wearing her extra thick base layers and had forgotten to take the heat pads out of her boots from our Cairngorm walk earlier.....Hahahahaha! We were starting to feel tired and really wanted to get back to the car so it was a good job I clocked that we were going the wrong way again.....Ooops! If we'd carried on the walk would've been a much longer one, so again we turned round and got back on track.



Which way?

We got back to the car at 3.17pm and we were totally knackered! Our short walk had turned into 3.7miles and 7,300 steps meaning we'd done 10.55 miles and 22,981 steps that day. It'd all been up and down hills too and we weren't surprised to find out that we'd done the equivalent of 125 flights of stairs. Our feet were definitely letting us know and were throbbing in protest. Apart from all the Cresties at the start, we'd seen nothing else but it did look like a really good area for Caper and Pine Marten. Surprisingly there'd been quite a lot of midgies out, even though it was still only March, so we were slightly worried about going again in June. With our table booked for 5.30pm and needing to go to the shop we thought we'd better get going and left at 3.23pm.

I stopped at the layby outside The Pine Marten Bar, and we went in. We'd never been in there before but it was a small building overlooking the woods with a Bar, Café and a shop inside, which always seemed busy. It also gets a mention in the Scotland book saying they get Pine Martin, Red Squirrel and Cresties at the feeders!. When we got in there were shocked at just how small it was, it was tiny! Firstly we looked around the shop and Wendy picked up a block of cheese and a cucumber from the fridge for Lyca. I grabbed a Snickers ice cream and a Pepsi Max and we took it up the bar to pay, as there was a sign on the counter in the shop saying it was unmanned and to use the bar. An Indian guy served us but he looked at the cucumber with total confusion and asked Wendy where she'd got it. Wendy went over to the fridge to show him only to find a sign on the shelf saying, "Not for sale" and she realized that it was for the café! Oh dear, this was going badly already. The bloke put it back and then pulled out a calculator from behind the bar and started to put the prices in for our stuff. When he'd finished Wendy's jaw nearly hit the ground when he told her it was going to cost her over £15! She was having none of it and said, "How much?!" in total disbelief. He did it again and this time it came out as a much more believable figure, which Wendy paid, although it was still expensive for what it was. After that we wandered through to the café and I asked for a choc chip cookie, which was also expensive at £1! We went back to the car and I started to eat my ice cream, while Wendy checked the bag with my cookie in it only to find that it was the wrong type and not what I'd asked for.....Grrrrrrrrrr! After I'd finished I put my wrapper in the small bag of rubbish we'd accumulated during the day and got out of the car to put it in the bin outside the shop entrance. As I opened the lid I heard a loud voice, shouting over at me and turned round to see what was going on. A scummy looking bloke with a fag hanging out of his mouth was waving his arms

around and getting far too angry at me for his own good. He shouted, "If you want to use a bin then go down the road and use the ones behind the wooden fence, that one's for rubbish bought from the shop and nothing else!" We'd already had our doubts that we'd ever go back there again, so that was the final nail in the coffin. Hmmmmmm I should've dumped it on his forecourt but that wouldn't be me, so I walked down the road and did as I was told.....Grrrrrrrr! We left at 3.45pm and headed for home feeling slightly irritated to say the least. Wendy spotted a Crow in a field as we drove past and said it looked like a Hoody. That would be a turn up for the books, so I reversed back up the road for a look. Unfortunately it was just a Hoody/Carrion Crow hybrid but the 1st we'd ever seen that far south on the mainland.

It was 4.03pm when we got back to HQ, so we had just enough time to chill out for a while before going out. Looking out of the kitchen window Wendy noticed that the birdbath had been knocked off its stand and was lying on the ground completely split in two. She reckoned she knew who the culprit was as well and didn't have to look too hard before she spotted him. A typically cheeky male Pheasant had been a regular visitor to the garden and had been making the most of the spillages of bird food we'd been providing. He'd also been sitting on the garden furniture on the decking out the front and pacing up and down on the windowsill outside the living room.



Resident Pheasant

No other bird would've been heavy or clumsy enough to knock a lump of concrete off its stand. Wendy put the kettle on and we managed to chill out for a while before we headed out at 5.25pm for tea. Having learned our lesson last time I drove down, so we were there within a couple of minutes. Slightly worried about how busy it was going to be we went in and told reception that we'd booked a table. We were told to go straight through and we were relieved to find it very quiet again. We weren't complaining but so much for Fish and Chips night being 'bonkers!' We picked our own table and Wendy went up to the bar to order our drinks. The foreign bloke was there on his own again and there was a stony faced couple in their late 60's sitting in the window waiting for food. We looked at the menu even though we already knew what we were having and Wendy went up to order and pay. While we waited the food was brought to Mr and Mrs Miserable's table in the window. Mrs Miserable was obviously not happy with hers and pushed it around the plate for a while before getting up and bringing it up to the bar. She came back empty handed with a face that would

stop a clock and started eyeballing her husband's food. When a waiter asked her if they could get her something else she declined and then proceeded to tuck into his instead. They shared his meal, which was a bit weird considering she could've ordered it for herself but we'd started to worry that ours wasn't going to be very nice either. When ours arrived it looked OK although neither of us were impressed by it. My chicken burger wasn't as nice as the one I get at home and Wendy's soup was disappointing and the cheese scone was a bit on the stale side. It'd saved us cooking though and we'd know for next time. We'd always wanted to try the food there too after finding out it was dog friendly but we'd always been staying just a bit too far away. We'd had high hopes but don't think we'll be in a hurry to go back for food but it was a friendly and chilled out place so maybe we'd pop in for a drink again. We didn't hang about after we'd finished and were back at HQ by 6.30pm.

My heart sank when I saw that I had 449 photos to go through from the day, so while Wendy went for a bath I started the slow and tedious process. After I'd finished I showed them to Wendy but by 9pm we were so tired we couldn't stay up any longer. I let Lyca out, baited the feeding station with peanut butter and dried the dishes and even Lyca was already out for the count when I got into bed! We tried to watch some TV but couldn't keep our eyes open, so we had to turn it off. Just as we started to get comfy Wendy said, "What was that?" There was a noise like something landing on the roof, so I suggested a falling stick. Wendy said that there was no wind and that she reckoned it was a Pine Marten, which would be typical of our luck as I hadn't put the camera trap out.....Bah! After that depressing thought we closed our eyes and instantly fell asleep.

Wednesday 23rd March

After a mammoth sleep we were up and about at 6.15am. Wendy had woken up at 6am and had dozed for a while until Lyca reluctantly surfaced. She took her out for a wee to find an overcast but calm day again and could hear the Woodpecker drumming in the woods, which is always a good start to the day. When I got up Lyca said, "Hello" then ate her breakfast, waddled into the living room and went back to sleep.....Lazy dog! While Wendy made the sarnies I went out to restock the feeders and noticed that the peanut butter had all but gone. What had eaten it was the question and when? That noise on the roof last night, could it have been a Pine Marten? Why hadn't I put the camera trap out? Urrghhhhhh! The birds had been using the birdbath a lot and now it was smashed in ½ I felt really bad that they now had no water. I managed to angle the 2 pieces so that I could fill them both with water, so hopefully it would do for the time being. My only concern was that the cleaners would think that we'd smashed it and we'd get charged for it, so I emailed them to explain. Hopefully it was replaced after we'd left.

After loading up the car we set off at 8.20am and the temperature was a balmy 7c. We can remember it being -3.5c when we were leaving a couple of years ago! When we got onto the A9 we hit some traffic lights, which we were stuck at for what seemed like hours. There was a convoy escort system in place and all the vehicles coming towards us were crawling up the road, so it took forever. We were next to follow the 'snail mobile' down the road until we were clear of it and we'd left it behind...Phew! Our 1st stop of the day was Dulnain Bridge (using the Scotland book for ideas) for another shot at trying to find us a weirdly elusive Dipper but when we got there we couldn't find anywhere to park. We'd never visited this site before, so I didn't really know where I was going. I drove around looking for somewhere until we came across a sign for the Riverside Path and a

layby, so I parked up at 8.45am. We walked down some steep steps, which were a killer on the old knees, through the forest until we came to the riverside path, which was a bit more than slightly wrongly advertised! We'd imagined walking along a path next to the river while looking for Dipper but in reality the path wasn't by the side of the river at all but ran through the trees higher up on the bank.



Hmmmmm

Just to rub salt into the wounds we could hardly even see the river because all the trees were in the way.....Grrrrrrr! Luckily enough it eventually dropped down to be next to the river and it was actually a very nice but also very small walk. It looked perfect for Dipper but we just couldn't dig one out.



That's more like it

The path quickly climbed away again so we felt pretty frustrated. When we came out at the other end we were back on the road, so we had a look at the river from the bridge.



Looking for Dipper

Not surprisingly there was no Dipper to be seen and our 1st walk of the day had been a birding write off, although it'd been nice to visit a new place. As we drove out of the town along the road next to the river Wendy shrieked, "**Dipper!**" but I was driving, so I didn't see it.....Boooooooooo :(It was apparently standing on a rock in the river, as you'd expect, but at least one of us had finally seen one. Further down the road I spotted a Red Squirrel on a feeder in someone's garden, which Wendy didn't see because she was looking the other way.....Ha!

Our next stop was another new place for us in Carrbridge, where someone had reported 4 x Capers a couple of months ago.



Carrbridge

We'd been unsuccessful in finding Caper at any of our other known sites for a couple of years, so I reckoned we needed to find somewhere more reliable. Firstly I stopped so Wendy could use the WC's and when she came out she showed me a picture of a Moth she'd found on the wall outside. We ID'd later and although the options were limited, as there wasn't much it could be in March, we settled on **Dotted Border**.



Dotted Border

While I waited for her I had a quick flick through my Scotland book and found out that the place to see Dipper at Dulnain was exactly where Wendy had seen it and not in the town where we went for our walk at all.....Doh!

At 9.27am we headed off towards the Golf Course, which we had to walk through to get to the footpath. Luckily there was nobody playing golf and we had the course to ourselves, which made life much easier. Not far into our walk I stopped suddenly when I spotted something unexpected on the path. It was a very dry looking and worryingly lifeless **Palmate Newt** but after checking it for injuries we could see it was still in one piece.



Palmate Newt

We now had a dilemma on our hands and we only had 2 options. We could follow the law and not pick up the Newt and just leave it in the middle of the path where it could be trodden on by another walker, or move it off the path to give it some cover and a better chance. In the end I picked it up and put in the damp

grass by the stream, which was in the direction it was heading anyway. I have no idea if this was the right thing to do or not but surely anything was better than where it was? The path finally took us off the golf course and veered off to the left, up a hill towards the trees. It lead us up to a bench, at a view point and while Wendy stopped to take it all in I went off to explore with Lyca.



Nice view

We needed to get into the forest but it didn't look as though the path went any further. I looked at the map on my phone and saw that even though it didn't look like it, we could carry on the way we were going. We went in and walked through the trees with our eyes peeled, it looked brilliant for Caper!



Looks perfect

We could just picture seeing one in there and with every corner we turned we remained hopeful of seeing one flying through the trees. It didn't take us long to realize that there was hardly any bird song and having seen absolutely nothing at all we had a horrible feeling that we were wasting our time :(.

All of a sudden things got worse when the path came out of the woods and skirted around it.....Noooooooooooo!



Uh Oh!

We needed to be in them if we stood any chance of Caper, so this was bad news. Not only that but as we climbed up a steep hill it became really boggy underfoot, so we had to dodge the worst of it as best we could. The view to our left was moorland, which looked good for Black Grouse with some ace looking Dragonfly pools scattered around amongst it. Although we wanted to be in the woods it was still good to see another new area with potential for different species in the summer. By the time we got to the top of the woods and turned right to walk across the back edge we heard a very loud and familiar sound. We looked up to see a fleeting glimpse of a Eurofighter blasting over only 100ft above us. It would've been an impressive sight but it quickly disappeared behind the trees and although we could certainly still hear it we couldn't see it for dust! Next up was a Tornado and yet again we couldn't see it through all the trees.....Booooooooooo! We'd started to wonder if we'd ever get back into the woods but luckily we eventually found a gate with a sign for Tolquhonnie Woods....Phew!



Is that 1 x 'n' or 2?

We're glad there was no fire in there, as we didn't have much faith in the capabilities of the fire beaters provided at the entrance! At least we were back in the woods though and we managed to add **Treecreeper** to our until then static trip list. Again the woods looked brilliant for Caper but we didn't know where to look. Did we look on the ground or did we look up into the trees and if so how high? Although that's how a lot of people see them we'd never seen a Caper sitting in a tree before, so we could only hazard a guess. We had to keep our eyes on the path too, as it'd become very uneven and had fallen trees across it at various intervals.



And duck

While we were negotiating a tricky section Wendy found something on the ground and it looked very much like Caper poo :O!



More poo

Now we had the evidence we needed that they were indeed somewhere in there we had a new boost of optimism and carried on with a bit more of a spring in our step. Saying that though, the walk was a lot longer than we'd bargained for (Oops again) and we were already feeling quite tired! As we started to get dangerously close to the bottom of the woods depression set in again. We hadn't

seen anything apart from Caper poo and it looked highly unlikely that they'd favour the outskirts when we'd seen how good it was deeper in. Our burst of enthusiasm had been short lived and the black cloud of another fail hung over us.

Just then I saw a movement flying through the trees and couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was a female **Capercaillie** and I had to get Wendy onto it quickly. I excitedly called out, "Wendy Wendy Caper!" and she raised her bins to look but her response baffled me and my jaw hit the floor. Cool as a cucumber she just said "Yeah" like as if it was nothing....What the? She'd just seen a Caper after putting all that effort in and thinking we'd wasted our time! I turned to look at her in disbelief only to see her standing there, looking bemused. It'd come as such a shock that it'd taken her brain a few moments to process what she was seeing! Hahahaha. When the penny finally dropped it was fist bumps all-round! Woo Hoo.....finally a Caper :). Needless to say that it'd flown through the trees so fast that there were no spare seconds to grab a photo but it didn't bother me, at least we'd seen it. Happy that our efforts had paid off for a change we carried on hoping it wouldn't be too long before we were back at the car. After our slow start we saw a Roe Deer and heard a Crossbill flying over. Lyca found a couple more Deer and went completely nuts by barking and pulling on her lead to try and get to them.....Urrghhhh!

When we got to the bottom of the path we found ourselves next to a road, so I checked my phone map again. Apparently we only had to walk a few meters down the road before we went back into the woods again, so we carried on. Within seconds we noticed that the narrow twisty road was much busier than we'd have liked and we got up onto the small, litter strewn, verge at the side. As the cars whizzed past us I realized that it didn't look right at all and that we'd come off on the wrong path meaning a much longer section on the road.....Doh! To say that particular section of the walk was unpleasant would be putting it mildly, so we were very relieved to finally find the gate back into the woods.....Phew! It wasn't long until we were back on the golf course where Lyca made a beeline for the stream where she had a massive and well-earned drink.

It was 12.40pm when we got back to the car and we were starving, so we stayed in the quiet car park to eat our lunch. We were totally knackered after our walk and when I checked my app it'd been 6.4 miles in total. It wouldn't have been quite so long if we hadn't gone the wrong way but hey ho :P. While we ate our sarnies a car pulled up, a woman got out and started to throw boxes full of wine bottles from the boot noisily into the recycling bins in front of us. It looked like she had a whole years worth in there! She wasn't the only one either and 2 more cars pulled up and started to do the same. We watched with amusement as, what we presumed to be father and son, held their bottles up to the light and tried to work out which colour glass bin they needed to go in. The fact that theirs all seemed to be champagne bottles and not your average bottles of plonk was certainly making the recycling side of the process much more difficult than drinking the contents would've been. All of them had obviously been saving them up for a long time to make the trip worth while but on the other hand we were in Scotland, so maybe that was just the average weeks worth :P. Hats off to them for going out of their way to recycle though, as they obviously don't have a kerbside collection in the area. Carrbridge isn't a big place and while we'd been watching the comings and goings we'd noticed the 2 small huts over the road. Wendy had read the sign on the front of one of them, which said it was the 'Community Store', whatever one of those is! There didn't appear to be a way into it either, so I reckoned there must be an entrance via a secret underground tunnel. We then had a look at the other and I jokingly said, "It'd be funny if it

was the local Fire Station.” which Wendy instantly shot down. When she looked at the sign through her bins and read out, “Fire Station!” we both started to laugh.



Fire Station!

It wasn't big enough to swing a cat in never mind store the equipment required to fight a fire. Coupled with the inadequate fire beaters in the woods we came to the conclusion that Carrbridge obviously doesn't have any fires and going by what we'd seen let's just hope it stays that way! I was still thirsty after my lunch and had a craving for some chocolate, so our next stop was the Spa. Being totally spoilt for choice I ended up buying a Star Bar and a Snickers as well as a Fanta just in case my sugar levels weren't just about to go through the roof as it was. Wendy had spotted a posh new café called the Carrbridge Kitchen, so went in to get herself a Cappuccino. She was very impressed when she came back and said that the menu looked good, everything was home made and locally sourced but the prices were a bit on the steep side. That was probably just about the only thing that might stop the other café going out of business! The Star Bar was too tempting to resist but after Wendy had broken a bit off for herself I could quite happily have devoured the Snickers too. She said that there was no way I was having that as well and I'd have to wait until later.....Boooooooooo :(.

My next plan was to try Tomintoul for Black Grouse, so we set off passing Dulnain Bridge again. I was so fed up of not seeing Dipper that I pulled over in the layby where Wendy had seen hers earlier and we got out for a scan.



Dulnain Bridge

I brought the P900 with me just because I was interested to see how it'd perform and we made our way down the road. Within about 20 seconds the bird flew in and landed on exactly the same stone as Wendy had seen it on earlier. Wendy went back to the car to drink her Cappuccino before it went cold while I stayed put to attempt a shot of the bird. Just as Wendy left I noticed a 2nd bird fly in, so it was nice to see a pair of Dippers. I got a massive distance record shot but as I moved up the road to get closer, they both flew off up the river.....Typical!



Dipper

I had no choice but to give up and we set off for our next stop of the day.

On the way we couldn't help but notice how many Buzzards we were seeing and realized that we'd never seen so many on any of our Scotland trips either. Surely it was a good sign and maybe the crackdowns on illegal poisoning by Gamekeepers are finally working? Driving through Tomintoul Wendy wanted to find the WC's before we were away from civilization and we kind of remembered

where they were. While I waited for her I noticed signs for the Glen Livet Visitor Centre, which we'd never seen before. In fact, we didn't even know that Tomintoul had one! I suggested going to check it out 1st, so we found ourselves in unfamiliar territory, driving round in circles. You'd think that finding somewhere in such a small town would be easy peasy but nothing is ever that straight forward. We found ourselves driving down a lane behind all the houses, which didn't look right at all. By a stroke of good luck and nothing to do with skills we eventually found it at the end of the lane and I parked up in the car park.

It was quite an impressive building for such a small town and we went in for a look. We were greeted by a very excitable and young black Spaniel followed by a much more sedate Labrador. I wanted to talk to the staff but a very loud English man barged past us and accosted them and loudly waffled on for ages about a load of rubbish. In the end we just grabbed some leaflets quickly before going back to the car. There were feeders up outside, which were caked in birds but they were mainly Chaffinches and Siskins, so we didn't hang around. As I was pulling away Wendy squealed, "**Brambling!**" and I hit the brakes hard. She'd spotted one in the tree over the road, which was funny because we'd only just been saying how it was weird that we hadn't seen Brambling yet. I got onto it but then it flew over the road to the feeders, so I headed straight back to the car park.....Hahahahahaha! Although I was waiting for the bird to hop onto a branch, so I could get a shot, it had other ideas and was much happier stuffing its face. I had my camera at the ready for when it did though and knew it was just a matter of time and patience. All of a sudden a couple of walkers appeared from a footpath and flushed every single bird off the feeders causing them to clear off completely.....Aarrghhhh! We waited and waited but although the more common species gradually came back the Brambling was nowhere to be seen :(With that we went in for our 2nd attempt at leaving and this time it was successful.

We finally got back to our original plan and were driving down the road where we look for Black Grouse. We scanned the hills and trees to our right seeing nothing apart from loads of Pheasants. The Pheasants in the area are very dark and some are even totally black, which causes some Birders a bit of confusion. There's even a warning about them in my book! Sure enough, every distant black blob we saw would eventually turn side on to reveal a long tail.....Urrghhhh! There's not many layby's on the road, so you're limited as to where you can pull over, which is frustrating as well. When we got to the end of the road, empty handed, I drove down the lane and parked up in the Glenmulliach Nature Trail car park at the bottom. I had hoped to go for a walk there as it had a nice loop path of a mile but the board had a sign on it saying that the paths were closed due to erosion.....Noooo! I got the leaflets I'd picked up from the Visitor Centre and started to flick through them looking for somewhere else to have a walk while Wendy carried on scanning the hills to her left. We were even further away from Black Grouse territory but she has a knack of finding things, which are ridiculously far away and wasn't going to give up that easily. A few minutes later she was onto something and had a tiny black speck, sitting motionless in her bins. In the end she got sick of waiting for it to move and was just about to give up when it flew. It flapped like a Grouse low over the ground but was just too far away to pick out any detail, even the white tail feathers she needed to see to clinch it. Although she was pretty sure it was what we'd gone there for she wasn't prepared to count it. Meanwhile, I'd found a new walk for us to try in one of the leaflets, which was still on the Glen Livet Estate and nearby, so that was our next plan sorted.

It was 3.11pm when we got to Clash Woods in Tomnavoulin, Glen Livet and we got out of the car feeling anything but spritely. I'd picked the walk because it wasn't too long and was meant to be good for Red Squirrels. We also felt that Lyca still needed more of a walk than she'd had, even though 6.4 miles already was pretty good and more than some dogs would get in a week never mind a day. She was raring to go as we hauled ourselves up the steep track at the side of the woods. We were feeling pretty tired and hoped that it'd level out at some point but every time we turned a corner it just carried on up the hill.....Urrghhhh! The scenery to our left was really nice though and we didn't see anybody else and had the entire place to ourselves :).



Clash Woods

When we finally got to the top of the hill it was all down hill from there on, which wasn't quite so hard going except for on the old knees! We had more Crossbills flying over than we'd heard anywhere else all week but we weren't sorry to get back to the car at 4.09pm. We'd done 24,500 steps by then and were totally knackered, so I cracked open the Snickers I'd bought earlier. Wendy had a bite and started to chew, just as I asked her a question. I think she must have been feeling the effects of the week when she answered with, "I don't like eating with my mouth full!" Hahahaha. This cracked me up and I went into a laughing fit, I'd like to see her try eating with her mouth empty!

After that we headed for home via the shop, to get some baps for my tea. We were back at HQ by 5.09pm and Lyca was as usual starving and wolfed her dinner down in no time. After that she conked out and we wouldn't have known she was there for the rest of the night! I'd bought some pulled pork, which was why I'd bought baps from the shop but after I'd finished it I was still hungry. It was only a small pack and there was just about enough to go in 1 of the baps. Wondering how I was going to fill myself up I then went on to make myself some pasta, which Wendy was horrified with. I ate another ½ of a bap too because Wendy had only had ½ with hers. Om nom nom eat your heart out King Henry the 8th! :). To be fair though we were burning over 3000 calories a day so I needed to ensure my body didn't starve :P. Wendy went off for a soak in the bath and it had started to rain by then and the forecast for the next week was looking awful, so we'd been very lucky. If we'd picked the next week for our trip we'd have been in for a total washout of a holiday.....not like us to be lucky! By

9.20pm we couldn't keep our eyes open and ended up having yet another shamefully early night.

Thursday 24th March

With going to bed so early we were up at 5.55am to find that it was rather grey outside and still raining very slightly. Lyca must've been flagging as she was being very lazy and was anything but eager to get up and go out for a wee but we were up early and didn't want to waste our last full day. After we'd got ourselves ready, had breakfast and Wendy had got our lunches sorted we headed out at 7.38am. My plans had fallen into place very nicely all week and I'd kept a visit to Forest Lodge for a day when the weather wasn't so good, so today was perfect :).

We arrived at the car park at 7.58am and it looked like we were the 1st visitors of the day. We already knew before we set off that we'd probably left it too late but it was still worth a shot. The wind had definitely picked up since we'd arrived in Scotland and it was much colder than it'd been too. Even so it was nowhere near as cold as we'd had in previous years. We set off down the footpath with that feeling of anticipation that we might just strike it lucky this time.



Forest Lodge

This was very quickly knocked out of us by the arrival of a white van, which drove past us and carried on the track ahead.....NOOOOOOOO! We shook our heads in disbelief as we had no idea vehicles could drive down it especially considering the wildlife around and it being in the heart of an RSPB Reserve. We could now kiss goodbye to any Capers though :(We realized that we might as well knock the entire walk on the head but we couldn't believe our luck when the van turned right and left the track.....Phew! We carried on feeling slightly more hopeful but with the underlying feeling that we'd had our luck with Caper at Carrbridge Woods and that a 2nd encounter would just be asking too much. There was a lot of Crossbill action in the woods and we kept hearing them flying over but could never pin one down. We walked the entire route and recounted our best ever Caper experience when we got to the section we'd seen it in. It didn't take much imagination to picture another but sadly it wasn't to be. On the way back to the car we finally saw a nice male Crossbill and then a bit further on we had a female sitting at the top of a tree calling. We stopped to watch it for a while but it was too high up for me to get a decent photo so I just grabbed an article shot.



Crossbill

I decided to try again from the other side thinking it might be better but I couldn't even see the bird, as the trees were blocking it completely. Next we heard **Redpoll** flying around but we couldn't see them through the trees either.

It was 9.36am when we got back to the car and I asked Wendy how far she thought the walk had been. I'd said that I reckoned it was only about 2 miles but she was going for more like 3 miles. I looked on my phone and was surprised to find that it had been 3.5 miles and that we'd already done 10,200 steps! Although it'd been a grey start to the day with very fine drizzle at intervals it hadn't been enough to get us wet. When we left the sky was blue and it looked as though we'd seen the back of the bad weather for the day. Feeling peckish we made a diversion to Boat of Garten shop where we headed straight for the hot food oven. Wendy asked if any of the pasties were cheese but was told that they'd already run out but they could have one ready for her in about 20 minutes. How good of them was that? I was OK and could've walked away with something there and then but because I'm so nice I said I'd wait and we'd go back. Wendy wasn't that keen but when she saw that there was nothing else to have she quickly changed her mind. While she was chatting to the staff they mentioned that EJ the Osprey was back on site at Loch Garten :O! We'd heard nothing about it but when they said that it'd been a bloke from Malta who works for the RSPB every summer who'd told them Wendy suddenly clicked. It must've been the bloke who we'd seen in the Boat Hotel! It was a shame that the Loch Garten Visitor Centre was still closed until 1st April but at least we knew to keep our eyes peeled from then on. We now had 20 minutes to kill, so instead of sitting around I suggested a walk round Garten Woods to see if we could find a Squirrel or Crestie while we waited. It was yet another new walk for us even though we had driven past it tons of times!

I drove down the road and parked up at 10.21am, choosing to try a loop route through the woods.



Garten Woods

It had turned into a lovely morning but disappointingly we didn't even hear a Crestie and saw no Squirrels. On the way back to the car we had to walk down the road but at least it wasn't busy. On the way I spotted a very nice looking pond. It had quality dragonflies written all over it, so this was marked down for our holiday in June.



Dragonfly Pool

When we got to the car I checked the time and it was 11.09am and Wendy's pasty would be ready, so I drove straight back to the shop. Wendy went in and they'd even gone to the trouble of making sure none of the other staff had sold it before she got there. She didn't have any change, so pulled out a £20 note and handed it over only to be given change from £10. She awkwardly had to tell the assistant that she'd paid with a £20 and after a bit of confusion she finally walked away with the right change! We were both starving by then and although we just wanted to eat our greasy pasties and get going again it was a slow process, as the fillings were so hot it was like eating magma pasty! We could both imagine the blisters that were about to pop up on our palates as we munched away, which made us wonder if it'd been such a good idea after all. We both needed some good old junk food and these had hit the spot, so we concluded that it had been

totally worth it :P. Lyca, as usual, ended up with some of Wendy's left over crusts, so we were all happy and ready to go to our next stop of the day.

We headed to Inschriach Woods even though it was a bit out of the way. We arrived at 11.59am it was raining very lightly again but that was fine by us considering the last time we'd been there it had been so windy we could hardly walk and we were being pelted with hail stones! Lyca, the unstoppable walking machine, was whining in the back of the car to get out and was raring to go. Maybe the pasty had acted like some kind of rocket fuel or something? :P. The track through the woods was the driest we'd ever seen it, in fact the temperature was the warmest it'd ever been for here and it was the least windy too.



Inschriach Woods

We can't remember ever having good weather on that walk in the past! We walked up through the trees with Lyca jumping over fallen branches, like it was an assault course, until we reached the track at the top. The woods were very quiet and we couldn't even hear any Tits calling. Wendy found a pellet on the track but we didn't hang around to look at it in too much detail. More interestingly, further along she found some Caper poo, which got our excitement up! We approached the end of the track with baited breath but when we turned the corner there was nothing :(. Instead of just going straight back to the car we decided to go on the path through the woods a bit, which we'd never done before. We wandered in and climbed up the bank to the top and stopped for a scan. It looked like perfect Caper territory (don't all the woods though!), so we looked high and low but as usual there was no sign. In the middle of the path was a mound with a well-worn track going up the side of it, so we decided to go and check it out. When we got to the top, it looked like a perfect watchpoint for a bird. This made us wonder if that was the reason we'd never seen anything there as a Caper could easily see walkers coming from a mile off? While I wandered around Wendy came across an area in a clearing, which was caked in Caper poo and it looked pretty fresh too :O!



More poo

Either a Caper had held a poo party or it had eaten far too much! We'd had a good scan and had seen nothing, so with that discovery we decided that it was obviously still being used and made a hasty retreat back down to the path just in case the bird needed another poo and we were making him cross his legs!

Back at the car it was 1.03pm and we were hungry again, so we had our lunch. Wendy had packed some cucumber for Lyca, as she'd normally have some when we're at home and she wanted to use it up before we left. She waved it at her expecting to have it snapped up in a flash but Lyca just looked at it and turned her head away in disgust. This was really unusual and Wendy tried again but she still showed no interest.....Weird. While we ate our lunch we started to feel the deflation of having to leave tomorrow and Wendy was going down like a burst balloon. She wished we could just bin everything and stay there indefinitely but our only consolation was that we'd be back again in June. It was also Easter weekend when we got back, so we had the Monday off work and she didn't have to go back until Wednesday, lucky sod! With the news that EJ the Osprey was back at Loch Garten I thought we could go to Loch Insh to see if there was any back there, so clutching at straws we left at 1.25pm.

When we got to Loch Insh 7 minutes later we left Lyca in the car and wandered to the cemetery to view the Loch. Any microscopic hope we had of any last minute luck quickly fell off a cliff and there was no Osprey there yet.....Boooooo :(. After that there was only one thing for it and that was a visit to the Potting Shed for some of the best cake in the world. Ten minutes later and we were hurrying down the path with a box containing our Lindt Chocolate cake, which we took back to car, so Lyca wasn't on her own for too long. Wendy had a bit and Lyca was sitting there licking her chops, so while I sat there demolishing the rest she tried her with her cucumber again. Lyca looked really interested this time but still wouldn't take it off Wendy, which was really odd. Wendy eventually wondered if the bits were too big for her to eat sitting perched on the back seat. She broke a smaller piece off and Lyca enthusiastically gobbled it down, so it was very quickly all gone...Phew! Fussy little madam! We were really struggling to think of anything new to do next, so I suggested going back to HQ to get a feeder for a last attempt at Crestie at Loch Garten. Wendy had also put some washing on before we left that morning, so wanted to hang it up to dry.

It was 2.19pm when we got back to HQ and after I'd filled up the feeders outside and Wendy had hung up the washing I grabbed a feeder and we headed out again. As we approached Loch Garten we saw a sign saying, "Please avoid Frogs and Toads, thank you!" then a Toad crossing the road! Wendy wanted to stop to move it and maybe get a quick pic but unfortunately I was on a blind bend and there was nowhere to stop. The Toad was just going to have to take its chance but hopefully it crossed safely :/.

At the car park it was 2.40pm and I hung up my feeder and got back into the car to wait and see what came in.



Loch Garten car park

Wendy noticed a dead Chaffinch on the ground and we wondered if the RSPB had taken the feeders down due to disease? Instantly there was loads of action and there were birds everywhere including a pair of Great-spotted Woodpeckers, which Wendy managed to get a nice shot of.



Great-spotted Woodpecker

We sat in the car hide filling our boots with shots but there was no sign of any Cresties again :(There was another car parked up and a woman got out just before she left and started to feed the birds out of her hand. She then drove off but stopped after a few yards and got out. She bent down and picked something up and put it somewhere safer. We had a scan around and found that there were Toads in the car park too, so she was moving them so they didn't get squashed. After she'd gone Wendy went over to see if she could find the one she'd moved but found others instead, the other was too well camouflaged. She grabbed a quick point and click shot and I put my gloves on and went over to move it.



Toad

She then found another one, which looked very dry and like it was dead, like it'd been run over. We went back to the car to leave them to it and as we drove off we could see it moving, so I got out and moved it too. It looked like it had been run over but only its foot had been injured, so hopefully it would be OK. There were 3 more on the way out of the car park, which I also moved and then a squashed one in the road. It must be so hard to avoid them if you're not expecting them, which is probably why the signs had been put out. I drove slowly down the road and it's a good job because we found 2 pairs right in the middle, which I got out and moved as well! You'd be there all day if you tried to save them all but at least we'd tried to do our bit for some of them. It doesn't bear thinking about to think about how many would be squashed in the road later in the day when it all kicked off after dark!

We were still reluctant to give up but we'd run out of places to go and at this late stage of the day we couldn't go far. I decided that the Boat of Garten feeders were our only option and we crossed our fingers that there might be a Squirrel or Crestie to make our otherwise non-eventful day worthwhile. Needless to say that when we got there there was nothing on the feeders and the woods were silent. On the way back to the car Wendy said something suitably depressing but in a bad Scottish accent but quickly shut up when she saw some people standing in the car park.....Hahahahaha! When we were in the safety and sound proofing of the car she said a few choice expletives and then burst out laughing with embarrassment. By that point we had no other plans and with having to leave the next morning we had loads to do, so we headed straight back to HQ.

It was only 3.42pm when we arrived back but we had to start packing up and getting things sorted for our departure. While Wendy was in the kitchen she was jammy again and spotted a Brambling on the feeders!!!! I grabbed the P900 to try and get a record shot through the window. It's not bad considering the P900s weak point is low light images and it had triple glazed glass to go through.



Brambling

After we'd all had tea Wendy started to clean the house, do some washing and packing. I emailed the cleaners to let them know that we'd be leaving a day early

in case they wanted to come in and clean tomorrow to make life easier for themselves. I had a quick look at Birdguides and there'd been Waxwings reported at Dulnain and Nethybridge, which would've been nice to see. I also noticed that the internet was 2.2 mbps down and 0.29mbps up, not bad for somewhere as remote as this! Wendy went off for a bath, so I thought I'd give the place a quick going over with the Hoover to help out. I plugged it in and turned it on but straight away I could smell burning and when I looked down there were blue sparks coming out of the front.....Eeeeeeeek!!! I quickly turned it off again and put it back where I found it thinking that it was a good job we hadn't made a mess and the carpets were still clean. When Wendy came down after her bath she coughed and spluttered and wondered what on earth the smell was, it was really bad! It took ages for it to go as well but eventually we could breathe again.....Phew! I emailed the cleaners about the Hoover as well, as I didn't want any other guests to try use it. I think we'd managed to break the dog again, as Lyca was a very tired all night and did nothing but sleep.

We spent the remainder of the evening thinking how lucky we'd been that the weather had been so good for our week. The footpaths had all been dry and there was no muddy paw prints on either the furniture or carpets in the house. The house itself had been an amazing HQ and we couldn't fault it. Having initially panicked about the storage heaters, we'd found them to be really efficient and even too efficient sometimes, when we'd been sweltering! The system in Dumfries and Galloway must've been the worst one known to man, or maybe it was just from the dark ages? Yet again we were really tired and when I checked my phone to see how many steps we'd done it was no wonder! We'd ended our last day in Scotland on 25,000 steps and 11.9 miles, which was really good. The depression of leaving had set in and after Wendy had written in the Visitors Book (with a special mention of how helpful the cleaners were) we couldn't stay up any longer, so at 9.35pm we ended up turning everything off and going to bed :(.

Friday 25th March

After another early night I was awake at 5.12am and try as I might I couldn't go back to sleep due to Wendy snoring! Eventually at 5.45am I gave up and got up to let Lyca out for a wee and have her breakfast. Not the best idea to be up so early as I'd now be awake for 21 hours before getting to the cabin on the boat.....Urrghhhhhh. It was a lovely sunny start to the day but my car was iced over, so it must've been a clear and cold night. Wendy dozed with a very lazy Lyca until 6.20am because she knew we had a long day ahead but really we both could've done with more sleep so we wouldn't be so tired later on. Although it was freezing outside the house was so hot and we wished we could turn the heating off. So much for storage heaters being useless! We planned to have a relaxed start to the day and didn't need to leave until the afternoon, so we still had time to kill. While Wendy was busy cleaning I drove down to the shop to get some freshly baked baps to keep us going for the day. When Wendy had made the sarnies and used up the last of our supplies she put the dishwasher on, cleaned the kitchen and did the rest of our packing, while dripping with sweat! I emailed the cleaners to thank them for being so helpful and for replying to us so quickly every time, as they definitely deserved some positive feedback for their efforts. There wasn't much left to do by then and at 9.15am we were just getting our stuff ready to go out when the doorbell rang :O! What the....? I went to the door to see who it was and was absolutely gob-smacked to see that it was a guy clutching a goody bag for us. He explained he was the father of the cleaning lady and he said that she'd really appreciated us letting them know about our early

departure and that she was really sorry for all the problems we'd had. I explained they weren't problems at all, just observations but he explained that I wouldn't believe what some moaning guests whinge about. I suppose it takes all sorts and I'm sure there's plenty of hard to please people out there who may have considered our minor hiccups to have been a major issue but we certainly didn't. We felt bad accepting the goody bag (which must've cost at least £30!) but he insisted, so we accepted it and thanked him again. We'd had such good service from them we'd been more than impressed to start with but this was just something else. After he'd gone we headed off out at 9.30am with the temperature in the car reading 7.5c.

Obviously our 1st port of call was the Boat of Garten feeders, where we really hoped to catch up with a Squirrel or Crestie again. We'd seen very few Squirrels over the past week and certainly hadn't filled our boots. When we arrived 3 minutes later it was freezing cold but there was nothing happening at all and the woods were totally silent again :(. It was the sunniest day so far, which seems to be the case every time we're leaving, and Wendy wanted to make the most of it as the forecast for the Easter weekend in the IOM was awful. It was nice to get out of the house before we melted too and looking up towards Cairngorm we could see that there'd been a fresh dusting of snow over night. We didn't stick around and were on our way to try our luck for the 2nd time at Golden Eagle before we left since we had nowhere better or new to try.

It was 10.15am when I parked up at Findhorn Valley car park and when we got out of the car we were horrified as to how cold and windy it was. We hadn't put any base layers on and the strong icy wind was cutting through our clothes like butter.....Brrrrrrr! Wendy's face said it all as we battled our way up the path through the middle of the valley.



Freezing Findhorn

It was hard to see anything through our streaming eyes, our faces and ears were sore and our hands were numb in no time at all. There were a few Buzzards flying about again but there was no sign of any Eagles. I think Wendy would've gladly turned round and gone back to the car but we carried on regardless. It was our last chance to see a Scottish specialty and we weren't going to fall at the 1st hurdle. We braved it and headed right to the end of the valley where we could see 2 birders ahead of us who seemed to looking to the left. Just before we got to them we looked up and were very surprised to finally see a large bird of prey

high over the hills being mobbed by a smaller one. We raised our bins, battling with the wind, to see a definite Eagle.....Woo Hoo! The question was which one and when we got up to the birders they said it was a Golden Eagle. We initially thought it was being mobbed by a Peregrine but our size radar must've been way off, as it turned out to be a **Merlin**. Cool! The Eagle remained cool as a cucumber and soared over us but as it did I thought that its wings look very broad but didn't want to say anything in front of the friendly Geordie birders, so I grabbed a record shot with the P900 before it disappeared behind the hills on the other side of the valley. The P900 isn't built for flight shots so it was hard going and I was cursing myself for being lazy and not bringing my proper gear but finally managed one where you could tell exactly what it was. It was a real turn up for the books to see that it was in fact a juvenile **White-tailed Eagle**!!!



White-tailed Eagle

This was the 1st time we've seen one of them at Findhorn and we'd read they sometimes winter in the area but now we'd seen it for ourselves. As it disappeared behind the hills we noticed there were now 3 large distant dots in the sky.... Errrr? Two of them were definitely WTE's but amazingly the other one was a Golden Eagle! Wow, how about that then!

All our depression from earlier finally melted away and happy with that, we could finally go back to car to warm up. We met an elderly couple who'd just been talking to the Geordies and they even mentioned how hard it was walking into the wind and getting stable views through your bins. At least it wasn't just us struggling!

Thankfully the wind was behind us on the way back so it was nowhere near as unpleasant.



Findhorn 2 - with the sun out

When we got back to the car it was 11.35am and our faces were bright red with windburn. By then it was lunchtime and while we ate our sarnies I checked my phone to see how long the walk had been. We needed to get some kind of exercise for Lyca into the day so that she'd settle for the journey to Heysham later but we really didn't think that Findhorn would be enough. I was surprised to see that it had actually been a longer walk than either of had thought and we'd done 11,070 steps already, which was definitely a good start. We didn't get too carried away though when we realized that the old couple from earlier were still nowhere to be seen and had just totally put us to shame.....Urrghhh! They still hadn't materialized when we left at 12.12pm and we'd thawed out nicely with the heat of the sun in the car. Driving back through the valley Wendy spotted a Hippy type with no socks, in a patterned cardi and harem pants at the side of the road feeding a horse. She certainly wasn't dressed for the temperature but she smiled and gave us a wave as we drove past though. I reckoned she was a total fruit bat but Wendy reckoned she was just happy being a chilled out Hippy and wanted to go and live in the local commune with them.....Oh dear.

It was 12.57pm when we got back to HQ and the temperature had risen to a more acceptable 11c. We went in and I started to pack up our stuff into the car, while Wendy emptied the kitchen bin and did a last check that we hadn't forgotten anything and that we'd left the house suitably clean and tidy.



Living room

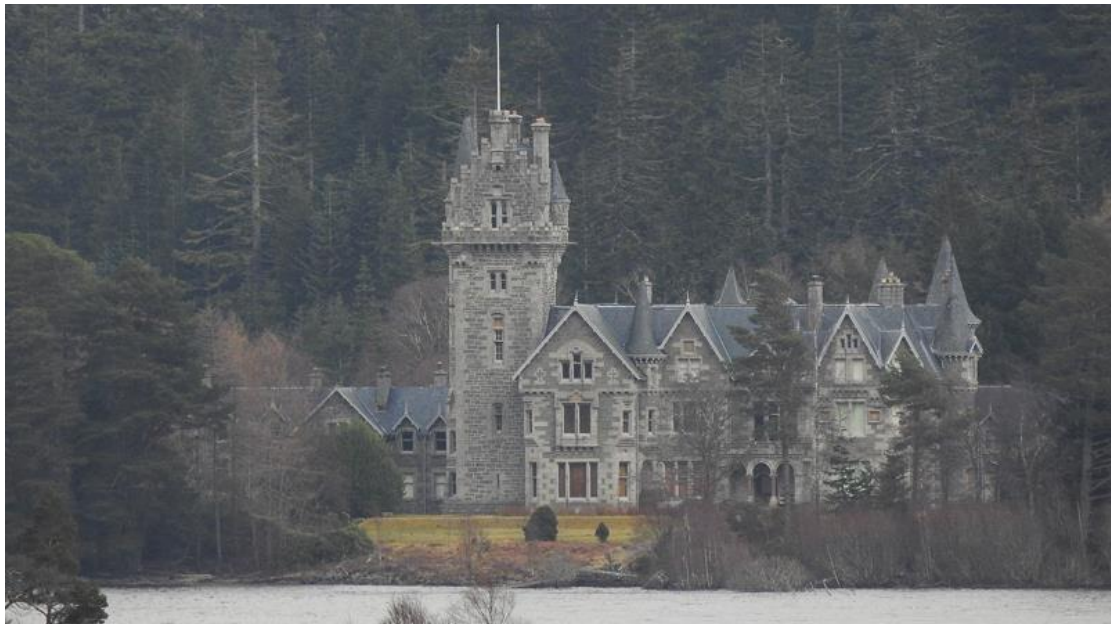
At 1.45pm we locked the door and waved a fond farewell to Mallachie wishing that we didn't have to go :(. Our only consolation was that the weather was going to break and the coming week was going to be wet and cold and that we still had one more new place to visit. I'd struggled to work out where we could stop on the way out as we were leaving a bit earlier than last time. I looked in the Scotland book and found a Nature Reserve, which was still in The Highlands and would only be a slight detour off the A9, so we headed for it. The info looked like it might be good in summer so it was worth a recce. Before we started heading south I nipped into Aviemore to fill the car up with petrol. After that we set off and as we drove away we noticed the constant stream of cars and campervans all heading up there for the Easter weekend.

It seemed to take absolute ages to get there after turning off the A9 and I was driving for way longer than I'd estimated.....Whoops! This wasn't good as we needed to drive all the way back on that section to get back onto the A9.....Eeek! When we passed Loch Laggan, which was huge, we knew we were nearly there and at 2.56pm we arrived at Creag Meagaidh. It's an interesting Reserve, which has been brought back from the brink after it was overgrazed by sheep and deer in the 1700's. Very few trees and therefore wildlife could survive and were lost but now it's managed and has some of the most varied habitats in the Highlands from an Arctic mountain plateau to rare alder woodland (so the leaflet says! :P). We were only planning on doing a short walk where we had the possibility of Black Grouse.....Bahahahahaha! In summer it has Mountain Ringlet Butterflies and something, which is on my 'most wanted' list, Golden-ringed Dragonfly. Also further up in the mountains there's Eagles, Ring Ouzel, Snow Bunting and Dotterel. I parked up and we looked out at the grey, windy and now rainy scene before us.....Urrghhhh!



Creag Meagaidh

It looked pretty grim out there, so I looked at the map and tried to work out which route to take. Having learned our lesson at Findhorn earlier we prepared by wearing our hats, gloves and putting the hoods of our coats up, as we weren't up for being freezing again. We were facing a field, which had a flock of Greylags in it but when I had a better look I found an unexpected **Pink-footed Goose** amongst them. Behind us was Loch Laggan, which looked impressive especially when we spotted a grand looking Castle on its banks on the far side. It was absolutely miles away but the P900 on full zoom made it look like it was right next to us near enough!



Castle

We battled our way against the wind up the path where we found a WC at the top, which Wendy thought she might as well use, while she had the chance. She was a bit dubious when she cautiously went in but came out very impressed. It was really clean and even had a hand drier and heater in there, which she'd been very glad of seeing as she was already freezing again. Wendy wasn't warm for long as we carried on up the hill on a path next to a small stream, surrounded by small trees. My guess is that this is where the Golden-Ringed will be in summer.....Fingers crossed!!



Hmmmmmm?

We tried to work out where we should be looking for Black Grouse and presumed it to be way up in the hills. We'd be struggling to see anything up there with just bins and in addition we were pushed for time, so we didn't put much effort in. When we got to the turning point of the loop we headed back through a really nice looking woodland section and could imagine what it'd be like in summer :). There was a monster feeding station set up amongst the trees at the bottom too but it didn't have much on it bar loads of Chaffinches. The path then sort of disappeared so I had to guess which way to go and hope for the best. As usual I'd guessed wrong and we came out of the wood on the wrong side of the field from the car park.....Dohhh. We could see that Pinky was still there so we retraced our steps back and eventually found the right path to bring us back to the car park. As Pinky was quite a way off I had a pop at a shot of it with my P900. The record shot came out quite well, considering the distance and conditions.



Pink-footed Goose

Before getting back in the car I re-read the interpretation board and realized that we'd done the wrong walk for Black Grouse.....Hahaha! We should've done the Meadow Walk instead and although it was too late to do anything about it by then we bookmarked it for summer as that's supposed to be good for Dragonflies as well :).

Back at the car it was 3.57pm and we really needed to get going, so I drove away at bang on 4pm. Shortly after leaving we found another 2x Pinkfeet in a field with more Greylags and we found ourselves in unfamiliar territory. This was a new route for us, so there was lots of new scenery to look at for a change. The road was also absolutely caked in potholes, so it was slow going until we came to a junction at Dalwhinnie Distillery to join the A9 again. We sat there for what seemed like forever trying to join the road but there was so much traffic we thought we'd still be there at midnight! This might not have been so bad though, as we'd have definitely missed the boat and would have had to stay in Scotland :). Eventually we were on the A9 but it had started to rain again and heavier than it'd been earlier, so we just hoped that it wasn't to go on to follow us all the way out of Scotland. We were sad to leave the Highlands behind when we spotted the 'Perth and Kinross' sign at 4.36pm but we consoled ourselves in the fact that we'd added 3 new birds for the trip on our last day. These were White-tailed Eagle, Merlin and Pink-footed Goose, which weren't bad at all. We were on another new road, which I think was called Duke Atholl's Way and we stopped for a quick scenery shot.



Nice

We passed Errochty Dam, which was absolutely huge and were back at Kenmore by 5.20pm. Heading towards our next stop my reactions were put to the test by a Red-legged Partridge, which ran out into the road. It came from out of nowhere, Wendy shrieked and luckily flew off before I hit it.....Phew! Luckily our next stop wasn't far away and at 5.34pm we were back at Amulree Road, where we planned to take a break for tea and have a last look for Black Grouse. I pulled over into a suitable layby and took Lyca out to stretch her legs and have a wee.



Amulree

I put Lyca back into her harness on the back seat and Wendy gave her a drink, which she guzzled but she turned her nose up at her dinner. We ate our sarnies whilst scanning the hills to our right for Grouse with no joy. The sky was clear, so it was very cold with the car windows down and having found nothing we called it a day and I set off for the journey down to the pub. Just after I'd pulled off we couldn't believe what we were seeing. Lyca, who had been fastened into her harness on the back seat, appeared in the front like Houdini :O! What the.....? How? She looked very pleased with herself as she plonked herself on Wendy's knee in prime position with her nose in the air. We have no idea how she'd managed it but one thing was for sure, she wasn't staying there! I pulled over in the next available spot, which wasn't even a passing point and switched off the engine. Wendy thought she'd try Lyca with her dinner again and now she was where she wanted to be she gobbled it up no problem.....Grrrrrrr! Fussy little madam! We had another scan while we waited but yet again there was nothing and we started to get a bit annoyed. It was evening and prime Grouse time, so why wasn't there any sign of any? We wondered why we even bother with Amulree when we never see anything there and gave it a bit of a slagging off.

Poor Wendy was struggling with Lyca on her knee, holding her dinner bowl with her right hand while trying to look through her bins with her left. Something had caught her eye, which had raised her hopes but it was becoming too hard for her look so she asked me, "What's that black blob in the tree?" I lifted my bins to look and couldn't believe our luck after all the bad things we'd just said. There was a **Black Grouse** feeding on the catkins up in a small willow tree and to say we were pleased wouldn't do it justice. Another car drove slowly past us and looked like it was going to stop but carried on. He pulled over further down the road and we assumed that he was also looking at our bird. It suddenly occurred to us that in all the times we'd been there we'd been scanning the opposite side of the road over the hills and moorland and that we'd never really looked at the side where this Grouse was. This area was just flat fields with the river running through them and a small area of willows, which we wouldn't have thought the Grouse would've liked at all! Ah well, you learn something new every day! I got out of the car with my camera and rested it on the roof to try and better my existing rubbish record shot until the bird flapped down from the tree and started feeding on the ground. It was miles too dark for any shots, my camera was at its near maximum of ISO16000 but it was brilliant to watch the bird going

about its business blissfully unaware of our presence. In the end I got one shot where you can just about make out it's a Black Grouse.



Black Grouse

I needed to get out of the car to get Lyca back into her harness without scaring the Grouse, so I drove up to the next layby. As I pulled up Wendy spotted another Grouse in a tree but this one was even closer than the last. The other bloke who'd pulled over ahead of us must've been watching this bird and not ours like we'd thought. I tried for more record shots from inside the car but it was even darker round there. Needing to get out to sort Lyca I drove further up the road to next layby as to not disturb this bird hoping that there wasn't any more, as we needed to get going. I never thought I'd see the day when I hoped for NO Black Grouse! I let Lyca out for a wee and then put her in the back where she should've been all along. She seemed to settle down quite nicely and I finally headed off for Cumbria at 6.45pm, which was a lot later than we'd expected.

Our ETA at the pub was 9.58pm, which by my reckoning was still way too early. Wendy on the other hand just wanted to get going and get the long drive out of the way as quickly as possible, so we could relax. Driving through the town of Creiff the streets were heaving and every pub and restaurant looked packed out. I just hoped that the Easter weekend celebrations weren't going to affect our nice quiet local, or I wouldn't be able to relax at all! We hit the 'Lanarkshire' sign at 7.54pm and my sat nav was telling me that we still had 122 miles to go, but at least we'd broken the back of the journey. The 'Welcome to England - Cumbria' sign was a huge relief at 9.01pm but Wendy was just getting impatient by then. Just after we had turned off the motorway, we were on the small dark road to the pub and we found a car, which had tipped it's trailer with a yacht on it.....Oooops!

We finally arrived at 'The King's Head' in Ravenstonedale at 9.49pm, which was 9 minutes earlier than my sat nav had initially estimated.....skillzz!



The King's Head

I parked up round the back and this time we didn't interrupt any compromising situations between any of the staff....Hahahaha! All I knew was that I'd been awake for too long and wasn't in any fit state to sit in a busy pub. We wandered in and as usual Lyca made a grand entrance by standing up on her back legs and dancing, which turned a few heads. Luckily it wasn't too busy inside although our usual seat was taken, so I had to have a quick rethink. I'd never used the WC's in there, so didn't know where they were and after the long drive I was in no fit state to be trying to think for myself either. I asked Wendy and she took me out to a back room where there was a darts board, the toilets and was completely empty, so after worrying about it being busy we had the entire room to ourselves....Yes! :). Wendy wasn't very pleased to be sitting in the scruffiest room, next to the toilets after picturing sitting by the real fire in the nicer bar.

She went up to the bar and got our drinks in and we sat on some hard wooden chairs in the window. Wendy gave Lyca a drink from her bowl and she settled down on the floor.....for about a minute when a woman came through to use the loos. Lyca jumped up and let out a bark, which was embarrassing but the woman came over and asked if she could say, "Hello" after seeing us arrive with her. Lyca then danced for her and barked again, so Wendy had to explain that she was a bit narky from being cooped up in the car all day having just driven down from The Highlands. The woman didn't seem to mind and made a huge fuss of Lyca while asking us a load of questions about her, where we were from and our holiday. Wendy nattered away to her while I sat there feeling extremely tired wondering where she gets her energy from and if she give off a Pheromone that attracts chatty strangers like flies to poo. After that she had a look at Facebook on her phone and was horrified to see a post that one of her work colleagues had put up. She said that it was so windy that her recycling bins had blown over and the contents were blowing noisily around her garden :O. NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! We already knew it wasn't going to be a calm crossing but Wendy really didn't need to see that and was feeling anything but relaxed and thinking the worst anyway. All I could say to reassure her was that at least we'd be able sleep through it in the cabin, so Wendy quickly downed her drink and went up for another :P. By 10.59pm I'd had enough and was dropping off a cliff rapidly, so I knew I'd have to get the last hours worth of driving done as soon as possible. Wendy didn't want to get to Heysham too early to sit watching the boat rolling around in the harbour and listen to the wind whistling through its sails for longer than she needed but more importantly I didn't want to fall asleep at

the wheel. Reluctantly she packed up our stuff and headed back outside to the car. Wendy got in and Lyca was being very naughty by not letting me clip her into her harness because she wanted to be on Wendy's knee in the front.....Bad dog! Eventually she was clipped in and I drove off at 11.01pm feeling anything but awake.

By the time we got to Asda it was 11.48pm and I filled the car up with petrol. The store was still open but there was a lot of Chavs parked outside. I didn't fancy leaving Lyca and all our gear unattended in the car so we didn't bother going in and instead just headed straight for the Ferry Terminal.

Saturday 26th March

I parked up in the 3rd queue waiting to board at 12.13am and it was really busy. Wendy wasn't happy, as it was way too early and now all we had to look forward to was sitting in the cold car and boredom, but at least we'd made it. It was a huge relief for me to be able to finally turn the car engine off and stop driving, I'd had enough of that for one day! Wendy rummaged about in her bag and pulled out the Stugeron she'd prepared earlier for us both. As we were only going to the cabin to sleep then home to bed I decided I'd have some this time as I had nothing to lose except for my tea and I didn't fancy that much :/. As usual the foot passengers were called at 1.15am before the car drivers and we had to wait until 1.31am.....Grrrrrr! When we got upstairs it was heaving and full of the loud Liverpoolians who'd been diverted to Heysham after their Liverpool sailing had been cancelled. We got our cabin key and settled down to sleep as the boat lurched it's way out of the harbour. Luckily we did go sleep though but were rudely awoken shortly after by the bloke in the cabin next door being violently sick. We had the pleasure of hearing him talking, laughing then puking for the rest of the journey but at least it wasn't us. Consequently we didn't get much sleep at all, so when we docked at 5.56am we couldn't wait to get home.

It was 6.10am when we opened the front door and the house was like a freezer.....Brrrrrrrr! I clicked the heating on and then set about bringing the bags in while it heated up. Wendy's Mum was still away, so Wendy had given a key to her Godfather who'd been popping round to check that everything was OK while we'd been away. Unfortunately the heating system is complicated so she hadn't bothered him with trying to set it for our return, so we just had to take the pain. After the food had been put away and the electric duvets had done their job we both headed off to bed and went out like lights. Even Lyca was knackered and didn't even want to go out for a wee. The next thing Wendy knew was waking up with a jump to the ear piercing sound of the doorbell ringing...What the? She then remembered that her Godfather was going to drop the key off but hadn't bargained on it being quite so early! She staggered out of bed and threw on her dressing gown in a Stugeron induced daze and went into the hall. Figuring we were still asleep he'd let himself in and was standing there holding the key which he was going to leave in the kitchen. He was very apologetic for waking her up but Wendy was too tired to care and was going straight back to bed anyway. She thanked him and said she'd pop round later and he left. She fell back into bed and shut her eyes only to hear the doorbell again.....Arrghhhhhh! She threw her dressing gown back on and went to the front door only to find that he'd left his car keys on the side in the kitchen.....Hahahaha! While all this was going on Wendy noticed that there hadn't been so much as a squeak from Lyca, so she must've still been out for the count, not surprising though as my fitbit was saying we had done 142,000 steps in the last 7 days. That roughly equates to 71 miles!! God knows how many more miles Lyca had done on top of that. After

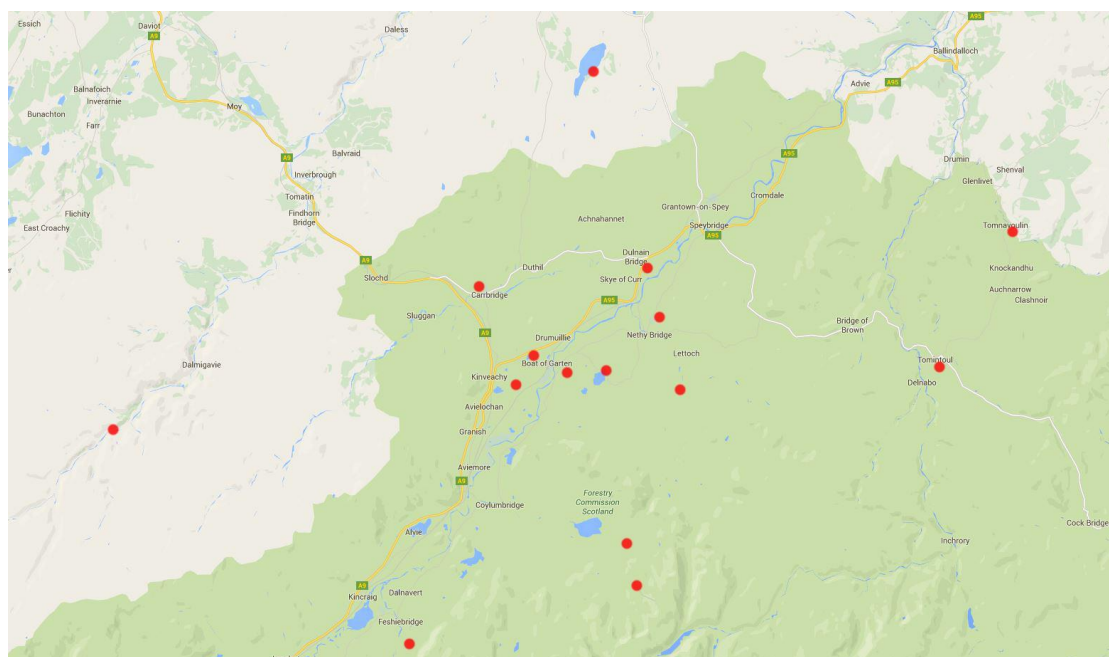
he'd gone she tried and failed to get back to sleep, so ended up making herself a coffee and grabbing the Mac to take back to bed with her. When I finally surfaced the entire scenario was news to me, as I'd been blissfully unaware of the whole thing....Hahahahaha! How I'd slept through the doorbell twice (or Lyca too for that matter) was anyone's guess :P.

We'd had yet another amazing trip up in The Highlands, and had stayed in our favourite Scottish Cottage to date. We never would've imagined being storage heater converts and the house was sometimes too warm for our liking. If we'd known how to control the temperature we'd definitely have turned it down. If the price was right we'd go back tomorrow but we doubt we'd ever be able to afford it again, as we'd been really lucky to get a big introductory discount. We just hope that whoever stays there in future looks after it like we did as it was new on the market. The Red Squirrels had been very thin on the ground again, which was disappointing but we'd seen a lot of Cresties and I'd got my best Crestie shot to date. We'd managed to explore a good number of new places which was impressive considering how many times we've been to the Highlands now and had done some recce's for our June trip, which had been interesting. The weather had been really really kind to us and although we'd been unbearably cold at Findhorn on our last day we hadn't seen any rain or freezing temperatures all week. I think Lyca enjoyed the snow and barking at the Ptarmigan on Cairngorm the most and I'd even go so far as to say that the Cairngorm walk is her favourite of all time.

I'd driven a total of 1,073 miles during the week and we'd seen a total of 82 species of bird. This was our lowest ever total for Scotland but we were only there for the Highland specialties and never visited the coast. A last minute Osprey would've been a great way to end the trip but it wasn't to be but I'm sure we'll more than make up for that in June. Wendy had even managed to get herself a lifer of Ring-necked Duck at Milton Loch on our 1st day, which is always a bonus :). There'd been no rarities to chase up in the Highlands, which was a shame but remembering our wasted day driving to sit in a total strangers house in Aberdeen a few years back, this may have been a good thing.

We just can't wait to go back in June! :).

Map



Bird List

Mute Swan	Cormorant	Collared Dove	Willow Tit
Whooper Swan	Grey Heron	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Nuthatch
Pink-footed Goose	Red Kite	Meadow Pipit	Treecreeper
Greylag Goose	White-tailed Eagle	Grey Wagtail	Jay
Canada Goose	Buzzard	Pied Wagtail	Magpie
Shelduck	Golden Eagle	Dipper	Jackdaw
Wigeon	Kestrel	Wren	Rook
Teal	Merlin	Dunnock	Carrion Crow
Mallard	Moorhen	Robin	Raven
Pintail	Coot	Blackbird	Starling
Ring-necked Duck	Oystercatcher	Fieldfare	House Sparrow
Tufted Duck	Lapwing	Song Thrush	Chaffinch
Goldeneye	Ruff	Redwing	Brambling
Goosander	Curlew	Mistle Thrush	Greenfinch
Red Grouse	Redshank	Goldcrest	Goldfinch
Ptarmigan	Black-headed Gull	Long-tailed Tit	Siskin
Black Grouse	Common Gull	Blue Tit	Lesser Redpoll
Capercaillie	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Great Tit	Common Crossbill
Red-legged Partridge	Herring Gull	Crested Tit	Bullfinch
Pheasant	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Coal Tit	Yellowhammer
Little Grebe	Woodpigeon		