

## Scotland Trip – March 2017

Having taken our last holiday in October we prepared ourselves to sweat it out until spring for our next trip, which felt like forever. I'd hoped to try Norfolk in early April as we'd never done it before but when Wendy came to book the time off she was horrified to see that all of March and April were already taken apart from the 1<sup>st</sup> week in March!!!! :( This week was a bit too early for us and would also mean that Wendy would be away for her birthday but to top it all off the next free week wasn't until May! We contemplated waiting till May (for about 2 seconds) but there was no way we could last that long so we had to just book it.....before someone else did :( This meant that we had no choice but to go to Scotland, as late winter in Norfolk would be pointless. I searched and searched but as usual Wendy's late booking tactic meant I couldn't find anywhere that had wifi and allowed dogs that wasn't horrible or way out of our budget. I was just about to give up when I tried one last time and found one that I'd never seen before. What was up with it? Why had I never seen it before? It looked amazing to me as it was set right in the Abernethy Forest and was accessed via its own track. Even though it was still expensive and despite the amazing location Wendy didn't like the look of the cottage itself and thought it looked a bit old fashioned....Urrgghhh! To me it was perfect, so I went ahead and emailed the owners asking if they could offer me any discount. They got back to me the next day and offered to knock off 120 quid if we didn't use the upstairs. Brilliant! I had a good feeling about this place, so not wanting to miss out and without Wendy knowing, I may have just gone ahead and booked it.....Hehehe :P. When I told her she wasn't very happy with me but I pointed out that you could bird from your bed if you wanted to and if we were ever going to have Cresties, Red Squirrels or even Pine Marten in our garden then it'd be there as it was in its own 20 acres of Ancient Pine Forest! She remained as skeptical as ever, pointing it out to me quite often that we always book a cottage that boasts great wildlife in the garden but more often than not we're disappointed. By then it was too late though and it was all sorted. I was also able to use the Steam Packet voucher my Auntie Brenda and Uncle Paul had very cleverly given me for Christmas which, along with the cottage discount brought the costs down very nicely indeed :).

Historically February is the windiest month, so by the time March comes around the worst of the storms are normally over but this year it all kicked off later than usual.....Uh oh! Storm Doris hit us the week before we were about to go away, followed quickly by Storm Ewan, which caused chaos everywhere including to travel arrangements. There's always something to keep us on our toes and cast some shadows of doubt on our 1<sup>st</sup> trip of the year, which is usually the most anticipated too. Wendy had been keeping up with her physio appointments for her back but 2 weeks before we were due to go she was sent home from work with a mystery illness. When she came through the door she looked awful and uncannily like a heroin addict! She could hardly stand up and went straight to bed shivering uncontrollably. If she continued feeling as bad as she did she wasn't prepared to go away, which wasn't like her at all. She was desperate to go but felt so terrible that she even made an appointment to see her GP, which is unheard of! He duly sent her for blood tests and she held her breath while she waited for the results. Luckily they all came back fine and it was put down to some kind of nasty virus, which although there was no quick fix for, she was very relieved to hear.

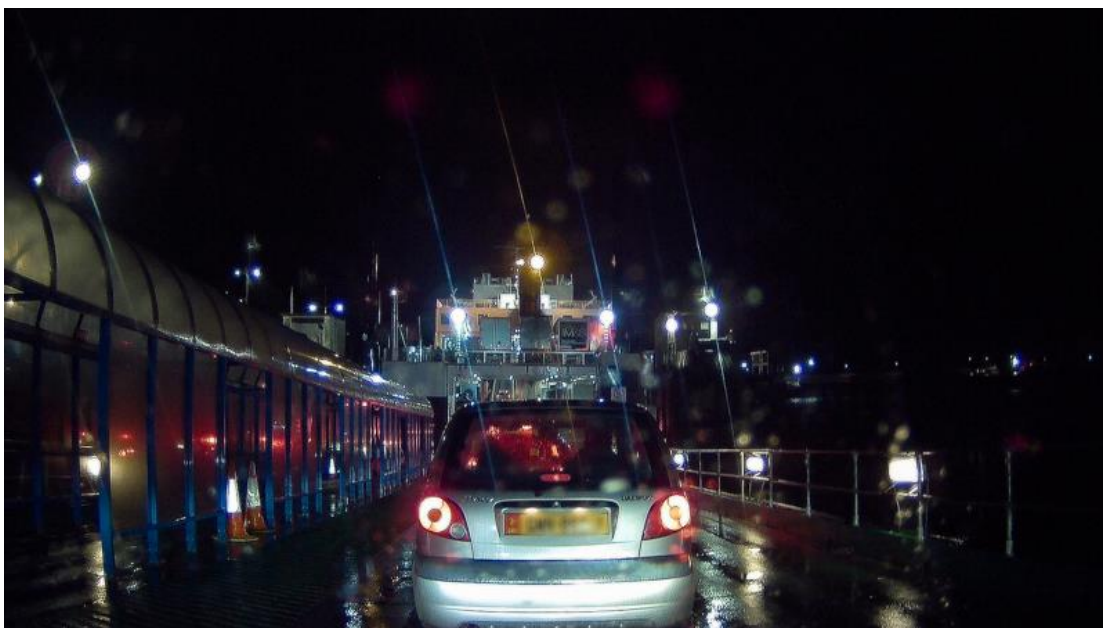
There wasn't much in the way of scarce birds to hit on the way up to The Highlands on the Saturday apart from a confiding Ring-necked Duck at Carlingwark Loch. Knowing that the birds are always miles off there we weren't convinced by the description of "confiding" but we normally visit there anyway so I thought we might as well have gander. We planned to make our traditional visit to Galloway Lodge for breakfast and for Wendy to stock up on Chutney and then to give Lyca a walk at Ken-Dee in the hope of

seeing Willow Tit. The forecast was for rain all day, which Wendy wasn't impressed with as this would be her birthday but we'd just have to see how it went before we planned anything.

Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> March

Wendy only had to work the morning having arranged to work an extra afternoon to cover for a colleague the week after we got back. She's very lucky that her employers are so flexible! She'd also been surprised by an early birthday present from them, which was a very thoughtful boat survival kit. One of the girls had remembered that she takes mini bottles of wine with her and had bought her a couple as well as some chocolate and sweets. How nice was that? As usual I worked through my lunch to get out a bit earlier but was also owed some time from not taking lunch earlier in the week, so I was able to finish at 3pm.....Yey! This of course didn't mean that we were any more organized and when Wendy got home at 1pm blind panic set in! There hadn't been a breath of wind all morning but predictably it started to pick up from about lunchtime onwards....Typical! Unbelievably it died down again at teatime but even though we were practically ready to go with an hour to spare it didn't stop us nearly forgetting our bins....Doh! Luckily Wendy said, "Don't forget the bins" which she thought was stupid and stating the obvious but if she hadn't we could've been in for the worst holiday ever! Imagine getting off the boat and realizing you'd left your bins behind :O! After I'd loaded the car up we were ready to go but I realized that I didn't have a drink for the journey. Wendy ran into a shop and grabbed me one as well as a bottle of sparkling water for her spritzers, so we were free to go straight to the cabin after getting the key when we got on the boat.

When we arrived at the Sea Terminal it was 6.57pm and not as busy as we've seen it in the past. It was raining and still quite breezy, so Wendy crossed her fingers that it'd be a pleasant crossing. The boat had berthed on the other side, due to it crashing into the other pier a few weeks earlier, which we'd never encountered before and at 7.15pm we boarded via the Linkspan. I'd recently bought a dashcam so was interested to see the quality of video grabs off it on the holiday. If they were good enough it would save Wendy having to scramble for the point and click every time something interesting or nice came up on our travels.



Dashcam shot

On boarding the boat I always stay at the bottom of the ramp rather than having to endure the noise, vibrations and several tricky hills starts whilst people slowly get into

position. This time it worked out brilliantly as one of the Steam packet people noticed the cars backing up and beckoned me to turn my car round and park up down on the bottom level. Get in! This meant I'd be getting out really quick at Heysham and not having to wait for the ramp to lower which seems to take forever. Result! Lyca seemed quite excited and pulled me all the way up the stairs, which didn't get her to the cabin any quicker because we got stuck at the bottom of the 2<sup>nd</sup> flight of stairs. There was a lady standing blocking the way, complaining that she had hurt her ankle and saying it was because she'd slipped on the step. The staff members were all rallying around her and one of them had even gone to get her a chair to sit on, which considering those chairs weigh a ton can't have been an easy task. Eventually one member of staff managed to shift her out the way and we were all let through before the chair was brought down. After we'd collected our key we headed off to the cabin but there were 2x Golden Retrievers ahead of us and although I tried to hang back so she didn't notice, Lyca picked up the scent instantly. They all had a good bark at each other through the cabin door next to ours before we let ourselves in and Lyca hogged Wendy's bed as usual.



Bed hogger

We set off at 7.36pm, which was nice and early and hoped that it meant we'd be getting off early too. The 1<sup>st</sup> thing I did was snaffle the biscuits but I was a bit disappointed at the new selection but they'd have to do. Wendy proceeded to make herself a Spritzer and then for some bizarre reason painted her nails blue.....Women! This always baffles me because she'd be moaning in a couple of days that it'd chipped already and would have to redo it, so why bother? I'd already had my tea at home so couldn't even kill some time by eating my usual chicken burger and chips.....Yawn. There was literally nothing on TV so instead we listened to an Elis James and John Robins podcast, which was at least amusing and helped to ease the boredom. Eventually Wendy ended up falling asleep and while I had to put up with her snoring I couldn't help but feel slightly envious. I reckoned Lyca needed to go out for a wee before we docked, so I ended up waking Wendy up in the process anyway. The long awaited announcement for us to go to our cars came at 11.16pm and we were finally disembarking at 11.25pm.....Phew! We didn't have to wait around either because we were the 6<sup>th</sup> car off but no sooner had we set off than my sat nav flew off its mount and landed on my leg.....Nooooo!!! I had to quickly pass it over to Wendy who managed to get it back on with a lot of cursing and fumbling. My 1<sup>st</sup> hurdle was of course the new bypass, which had only opened recently. I was looking forward to being able to skip going through Lancaster but was a bit confused by the several sets of lights getting onto the bypass. Fortunately, as it was late



and quiet my dodgy lane decisions didn't matter :). It was straightforward after that but we only managed to save 4 minutes but then again there was only the ferry traffic on the road, so it would be a very different story during the day.

Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> March

We were tired, it was dark and raining, so Wendy wasn't really in the mood to celebrate when she realized that it was midnight and her birthday. All she wanted to do was get some sleep and as much of it as possible before the long day ahead of us. Things were chugging along nicely but obviously it'd be too much to ask for our journey to go without some sort of incident. There was a convoy of lorries in the slow lane to my left, which I was going past in the middle lane with ease. All of a sudden a lorry violently swerved into the middle lane right in front of me without even indicating. Luckily the outer lane was clear so I was able to quickly swerve into it but if it'd been full I hate to think what would've happened :O! As I passed the lorry I could see the cause of the near accident and it turned out that the lorry had approached a van going at 30mph way too quickly and had taken evasive action so as to not smash straight into the back of it. Why the lorry driver hadn't noticed the slow speed of the van I'm not sure but it had all the hallmarks of him being on his phone.....Grrrrr! Our hearts were racing but we eventually breathed a sigh of relief and carried on letting out a cheer when we passed the 'Welcome to Scotland' sign at 12.42am.

We arrived outside the Travelodge at a very respectable 1.06am and bailed up to the room to finally get some sleep. Before that could happen Lyca needed a drink, the heating needed cranking up and we needed to do our teeth and get changed. By the time we'd done all that it was 1.30am and as soon as our heads hit the pillows we went out like lights. We managed to sleep until Lyca woke us up at 8.20am and the 1<sup>st</sup> sound we heard was some very noisy **Rooks** outside, so we peered out of the window to see what all the fuss was about.



A room with a view (sort of)

The Rooks were all busily picking out and flying up with sticks to build their nests in the trees surrounding the car park, so no wonder it was so noisy! That coupled with a **Dunnock** singing at full belt made the morning feel very spring like and the weather looked OK too. We could hear **Chaffinch**, a **Buzzard** calling overhead and a **Woodpigeon** but by then Lyca was getting impatient and wanted to go out for a wee. While I added **Robin**, **Blackbird**, **Song Thrush** and **Jackdaw** outside Wendy made



herself a coffee and sorted Lyca's breakfast for when she came back in. When I brought Lyca in Wendy was sitting up in bed with her Birthday cards and after Lyca had wolfed down her food she jumped back on the bed and plonked herself on top of them all!



What about me?

She obviously thinks that she's far more important! Wendy was still feeling well below par and had said that she wanted a more relaxed start to the day than usual. As it was her Birthday I had to agree, although we couldn't afford to hang around too long as we had to get up to the cottage before Tesco was due to arrive. While we got ready to go we saw **Great Tit** and **Starling** from the window and had a cereal bar each to keep us going until breakfast. It was 9.56am when we finally drove away and 7c, so not really that cold. My 1<sup>st</sup> job was as always to fill my petrol tank but when I glanced over to the petrol station I was horrified to see that it had closed down :O! Uh oh! We could really do without the panic of trying to find one up in the Highlands before I totally ran out like what happened a couple of years ago. By my reckoning we should be OK as we weren't doing the slow winding tourist route this time, we were just going to blast (60mph) up the A9 and I should have enough to get to the Aviemore petrol station. There wasn't much I could do about it at the time, so I carried on with our plan to try and see the Ring-necked Duck at Carlingwark Loch.

As we passed the entrance to Dumfries we spotted some **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** on a bridge and **Carrion Crows** near some factories. There was a **Pied Wagtail** sitting on an overhead cable and rounding a corner next to a Loch there were 2 dead Badgers in the road :( On the Loch was a single **Mute Swan** and some **Rabbits** in the field next to it. Suspiciously there was yet another dead Badger at the side of the road, a flock of **Redwing** flew over and we found a field of **Herring Gulls** just before the turning into Castle Douglas. As I drove down the road to the Loch we added **Black-headed Gull** and **Collard Dove** and I parked up at Carlingwark Loch at 10.23am. Usually we'd get out and walk down to the hide but the Duck was meant to be viewable from the car park, so we had a scan.



Carlingwark Loch

There were **Goldeneye**, **Tufted Duck**, **Coot**, **Moorhen** and **Mallard** out on the water but typically no sign of our target bird. A very cute Cockerpoo was heading our way, so we admired that for a bit and noticed a **Blue Tit** going in and out of a nest box on a tree opposite us. There were good numbers of **House Sparrows** but after scanning again and again there was still no sign of our target bird and we were hungry, so we didn't hang around and left at 10.32am. I only had a short drive to Gatehouse of Fleet and on the way we added **Cormorant** on a Loch and a small flock of **Long-tailed Tits** flitted across the road ahead of us.

It was 10.48am when I parked up in the car park next to Galloway Lodge and I groaned when Wendy told me I'd have to go in with her to help her out. Firstly she filled a basket with loads of jars of chutney to keep her going for the next year and gave me some money to go and pay for it while she went through to the café to order our food. I took the heavy bag back to the car and squeezed it into the only gap I could find then got in to wait. There were **Siskin** in the surrounding trees and I watched some House Sparrows going in and out of the eaves of the Spa roof. The river was so high and fast flowing that I knew there'd be no point going down there to look for Kingfisher or Dipper, so that'd save us some time. Considering it was a Saturday the roads had been really quiet so far and I crossed my fingers that they'd stay that way. Eventually Wendy reappeared clutching a bag of food in one hand and a Cappuccino in the other.....Om nom nom :). As always my sausage sarnie and Wendy's cheese and tomato toastie were delicious and just what the Dr. ordered. My eyes lit up when Wendy produced another box, which contained a very nice chocolate brownie :). When we'd finished Wendy put all our rubbish in the bin just next to the car and I drove away at 11.25am.

It wasn't long before we were admiring the views of Laurieston and although there was no Grey Wag at the bridge we did spot a **Wren** on a stone wall.



Laurieston

When we were practically at our next destination Wendy commented that we hadn't seen any Red Kites yet. This was almost instantly followed by, "Ooooo **Red Kite!**" We then found 2 more in a tree at the side of the road, 3 flying over the car and when we were heading down the track to Ken-Dee we counted 13 more! Something caught my eye in a tree at the side of the track and when we looked it was more Red Kites, so I stopped the car with the intention of trying to get a shot. By the time I'd I stopped we'd counted 10 more just in that tree but the birds all flew off before I could even grab my camera. We followed them in our bins and as if we hadn't already filled our boots more birds started to come in until the sky was like a Kite Soup with at least 30 birds circling overhead.....Wow!



Kite-tastic!

We'd never seen so many in one spot before and seeing as it was such an impressive sight we stopped for a while just to watch them. We didn't have all day though and a **Mistle Thrush** flew over as we carried on down the road.

I parked up in the car park at Ken-Dee at 12.02pm and Wendy looked anything but enthusiastic and slightly worried considering a week ago she was still panned out in bed.



She still felt dreadful and doubted she'd be able to get as far as the 2<sup>nd</sup> hide but I told her we'd turn back if she didn't feel good. Something told me that she'd be fine once she got going especially as this walk was completely flat. I was being lazy again and decided to take the small gear (300mm + 1.4tc) instead of the big 500mm as I am getting too old to be lumping that heavy thing long distances! :(.



Ken-Dee

Looking down at the fields there were **Greylag Geese** but they were too far away to tell if there were any White-fronts amongst them and also **Lapwing** displaying. Lyca seems to know her way now and pulled me towards the entrance to the track and it looked as though we had the place to ourselves as we set off :). It was so quiet that the only sounds to break the silence were that of birds singing and it wasn't long before we heard the feeble squeak of a **Bullfinch**. Next up was the rowdy rattling of a couple of **Fieldfare** that Wendy then found up in one of the nearby trees but it was all a bit quiet compared to our last visit. The weather was holding up though, which was a real bonus after we'd read the forecast and seen that it was giving rain for the whole day :).

By the time we reached the bottom where it turns into deciduous woodland Wendy was starting to run out of steam and said that her legs felt like lead weights. She'd had no energy to start with and had already done more than she had in the past 2 weeks but luckily we didn't have much further to go. I picked up a **Nuthatch** on call (skillzz) and we watched it foraging from tree to tree and then we heard a **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. We looked up just in time to see it flying over and moments later a 2<sup>nd</sup> bird appeared in hot pursuit. As we went through the rusty iron gate to the hide a group of about 10 very loud Northern Irish birders were making their way back, so we were glad we hadn't got to the hide when they were all in there! When we got to the hide Wendy went up the steps to see if there was anyone else inside and I hung back with Lyca just in case. She came back out shaking her head and said there were 2 people in there already, so we'd have to take it in turns and keep Lyca out. I'm sure Lyca would behave in the hide but the other people could object or be scared of dogs so we never take her in unless it's empty. Wendy went back inside and stood behind the couple, who'd taken up residence and had their belongings strewn all over the bench, so there was no room for anyone else. Straight away Wendy added **Willow Tit** which was coming to the feeder just outside the window again.....Phew! There was a very close Nuthatch too and after about 5 minutes she came out so that I could go next. Lyca doesn't like being left out of anything so as soon as I'd closed the door of the hide Lyca started to whinge and was pulling on her lead to get up there! I really wanted to better

my existing Willow Tit shots but with the bench hoppers and hearing Wendy trying to stop Lyca whinging I was somewhat disadvantaged and slightly put off. We could hear a **Raven** flying over but it wasn't long before I gave up taking pics and went back outside. This was the best shot I got.



Willow Tit

After handing Lyca back to me Wendy went back up to have a quick look at the Loch to see what else was about but it was surprisingly dead and she only added **Teal** and **Oystercatcher**.



Loch Ken

Time was ticking and we needed to get going if we were going to get to the cottage in time for our Tesco delivery, so we set off back to the car. A **Pheasant** ran across the path in front of us, which Lyca luckily didn't notice but by then both our bladders were inconveniently telling us that we needed to find a WC. Obviously there wasn't one nor did we know of any until we reached Kenmore, which was too far away, so we had to

make do with a safe place in the trees instead.....Phew! Moments after I emerged to take Lyca off Wendy a bloke appeared, so I'd been very lucky. He was on holiday from Wales and jokingly said that he was only there because they'd named the Loch after him, so we presume he was called Ken. I couldn't help but notice that he had a P900, which it turned out he'd bought 2 years ago. He showed us some of his shots and video of a Kestrel eating what looked like a Red-leg, which were pretty impressive. He'd got sick of carrying all the heavy gear around with him and like me he agreed that it was a great bit of kit. Although he was funny and I could've stayed chatting about cameras all day Wendy was starting to give me the, "Hurry up!" look so I politely ended the conversation and we carried on. We were far too hot in all our winter gear on the way up the hill and Wendy was really flagging by then. We noticed a flock of **Meadow Pipits** in one of the fields, which hadn't been around on the way down. Wendy all of a sudden remembered that we'd forgotten to pick up the poo bag, so we wandered back down the path until we found it. Nearing the end of the track I spotted a Red Kite perched up in a tree. Normally they fly off but this one was staying put so I quickly grabbed a shot of it for my 1<sup>st</sup> ever photo of a perching Red Kite! I was gutted that I didn't have my 500mm although I'm quite happy how it turned out with the little 300.



Red Kite

It was 2.08pm when we got back to the car and there was a **Grey Heron** standing on top of a hill probably looking for Frogs. All we had to do now was get to the cottage and I'd decided to try and speed things up a bit by cutting out the Perthshire Tourist Route and going up on the A9 instead. It was 9c when we left at 2.16pm and our eta at the cottage was 6.35pm, so I just hoped that the remaining petrol in my tank would last until Aviemore having not been able to fill it up earlier. Before we really got going we had to keep our eyes peeled for a bin, as we didn't fancy sharing the car with a poo bag for the entire journey up. Luckily Wendy spotted one next to a Loch, so I jumped out and got rid of it and we added **Little Grebe** to our list.





Roadside Loch

Driving through New Galloway there was snow on the hills, so we crossed our fingers that The Highlands would be covered in snow when we arrived. Things were going well but no long drive ever goes without a hitch or two and this time was no exception! All of a sudden and out of nowhere a **Roe Deer** ran out in front of the car, so I slammed on my brakes :O! Two more came leaping out from the ditch at the side of the road and luckily I managed to avoid a hideous accident and all three of them made it safely to the other side.....Phew! It all happened so quickly and could've easily had a different outcome, which could've potentially ended our holiday before it'd even started. It'd been a scary experience and although I'm always cautious it made me even more so. Wendy had just about managed to calm down when her eye was drawn to something on the hill to her left. When she looked at it she could see 4 legs sticking up in the air and realized that it was a dead animal. Initially she presumed it to be a cow but in the brief moments of looking at it and clocking the area she looked away quickly when she realized that it was actually a Horse :O! Horrible!

We passed the South Lanarkshire sign at 3.33pm and seemed to be heading into some horrible weather.



Great!

Just before Happendon Services it went very dark and started to hammer down and we hoped it wasn't going to ruin the rest of our journey.



Yuk!

We saw a **Magpie** driving past Glasgow and left the North Lanarkshire sign behind us at 4.19pm. There were 100's of **Pink-footed Geese** in a field at Stirling and further on we found another field full of **Common Gulls**. The weather was really grim as we drove past Perth and we were so happy when we saw the Cairngorms National Park sign at 5.39pm....Yey! At 5.58pm we cheered when we saw the Welcome to the Highlands sign and the temperature had dropped to 0.5c but I still had enough petrol in the tank to get us to Aviemore. It'd started to get dark by then and after noticing the temperature was now down to 0c it started to snow when we got to Ralia. It was quite heavy and was sticking to the road and the further I drove the worse it was getting.



Uh Oh!

I know we'd hoped for snow but we started to worry that we wouldn't be able to get to the cottage and that Tesco wouldn't be able to deliver either...Eeek! Fortunately for us it stopped at Kingussie and the road was totally clear again, so we breathed a sigh of relief as well as feeling slightly disappointed at the same time. We were starting to feel quite

hungry and Wendy was toying with the idea of nipping into the Italian and getting us a take out pizza. She was so tired that she didn't feel particularly like standing in a restaurant full of people waiting for the pizza, so duly ditched that idea off. If it wasn't for Lyca I think we'd have just gone in and eaten but there was no way we were prepared to leave her in the car full of our stuff, so that wasn't an option. The next thing we saw was a load of blue flashing lights and having seen enough horrible things during the day morbid fascination still took over. Luckily there was nothing gruesome to see but there'd been an accident bad enough to warrant 2x Fire Engines, an Ambulance and the Police. Not good. When we finally drove into Aviemore at 6.34pm, even though it was dark, we could tell there was no snow at all, so we stopped worrying about not being able to get to the cottage and I pulled up outside the petrol station with 20 miles still left in the tank. Wendy went in to have a look to see if there was a mini bottle of Prosecco as a birthday treat or any pizzas for my tea. She came back out empty handed disappointed that she couldn't have a glass of fizz but she'd found some pizzas and told me where they were, so I grabbed one when I went in to pay. When I gave it to her to hold her heart sank, it wasn't vegetarian, so she wouldn't be able to nick any of it like she'd hoped.....whoops! I knew vaguely where the cottage was but as it was deep in Abernethy Forest we both had to keep our eyes peeled so we didn't miss the turn off, which was easier said than done in the dark! Luckily after driving for what seemed like too long we saw the sign for the house and I turned off. The track leading to the house lead us through the snowy forest and it felt like we were in the middle of nowhere.



Cottage entrance

As we approached it I could see a potential problem, which was the steps up to the door. I didn't fancy lugging all the heavy stuff up them but Wendy reckoned that the slope at the front of the house was a driveway and I should drive up that. We couldn't tell because everything was under a thick layer of snow, so I erred on the side of caution, which was lucky as it turned out to be the lawn.....Doh!

It was 7.07pm when I parked up outside Rymore Wood Lodge and we couldn't wait for our 1<sup>st</sup> peek inside although Wendy was feeling apprehensive to put it mildly. She was probably itching to have a go at me for booking the cottage without her having given me the go ahead! :). We clambered out of the car in a tired daze and I got Lyca out from the back seat. As we staggered up the steps in the dark I couldn't find the key safe, which was meant to be next to the front door....Uh oh! I scanned around with the torch on my phone until I eventually found it down at ground level. I unlocked the door and we found ourselves in a huge porch with a massive stack of bottled water in the corner.



What was all that about? We opened the door to the rest of the house and instantly felt the chill of the cold air, which Wendy wasn't pleased about. After we'd had a quick look around Wendy put the oven on to heat up for my pizza and went around closing the curtains although it was highly unlikely that anybody would be around in the forest at that time of night. I brought the bags in and put the heating on while Wendy rushed around unpacking and finding a home for all our stuff. She was pleasantly surprised by the interior and apart from the fact that there was no heating on and it was cold she didn't moan once. This was a total shock to me, as I'd fully expected her to find a reason to hate it. It did seem odd that the heating wasn't on seeing as it was March and snowing but a quick change of the settings and the heating was on and it was warm in no time. I found a note on the table from the owner, which said that they'd had the water filter replaced recently and that it wasn't removing as much iron as it should, which was why he'd supplied us with all the bottled water. The water to the cottage was supplied from its own bore hole but he went on to say that you'd need to drink 200litres of it for it to be of any harm to us. It was going to be fixed after we'd gone but we couldn't see it being an issue at all. We had a load of water in our Tesco order heading our way anyway, so we wouldn't even need to touch his. Wendy opened the fridge and found a pint of milk in there, which was good but better still was the free bottle of Prosecco, which after the long day we'd just had and the very uninspiring tin of lentil soup she'd brought and had to eat whilst looking at my pizza it was just what she needed to finally celebrate her birthday :P. Tesco arrived at 8.20pm and when it was all put away Wendy went off to soak in a hot bath, although she said the water was slightly yellow. While I was getting changed into my comfy PJ's I noticed a moth near the light on the ceiling of the bedroom, so when Wendy reappeared I showed it to her. She recognized it as being a **Dotted border** but neither of us had the heart to put it outside in the snow and freezing temperature, so we left it there for the night.

Totally unexpectedly the phone started to ring, so Wendy said that I should answer it.....Urrghhhh! Who would be ringing a holiday house? It couldn't be Wendy's Mum because she didn't know the number, so I cautiously picked it up and said, "Hello?" I was surprised to be greeted by the very friendly owner who said he'd been there the night before to greet us and had put the heating on etc. thinking we were arriving a day earlier.....Ooops! That explained why the house was so cold when we'd arrived then. He said he'd been quite worried about us especially as he knew we had Tesco coming at 8pm and there was no sign of us. I apologized a lot as I realized I hadn't made it clear in my emails to him that we would be arriving on the Saturday.... Eeeek! :( . He explained in more detail about the water but I told him not to worry and that we had enough bottled water to sink a ship with, so we'd be fine. He seemed really nice and then said he hoped to pop round before we left as he likes to put faces to names but that he had a physio appointment and may not make it in time. After all that Wendy finally poured herself a glass of fizz, which I ended up having to open with great difficulty. The cork just wouldn't budge and both our hands were bright red and sore after so many attempts. She then phoned her Mum's number and hung up, so she could get the number for the house and phone her back. While she was nattering I checked the internet speed and hilariously it was 0.8mb download.....Urrghhhh! We watched a bit of TV and already felt pretty much at home but by 10.51pm we were so tired we had to go to bed.

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> March

When we woke up it was 7.20pm and we were pretty excited to see what our surroundings looked like. Wendy peered out through the curtains only to find the best feeding station we have ever seen and a **Red Squirrel** on the feeder right outside the bedroom window! Woo Hoo!



Wow!

Lyca was raring to go out for a wee, so I put her on her lead and put my coat on to brave the cold while Wendy got her breakfast ready for when she came back in. Lyca was fascinated by the remains of a snowman and wouldn't stop barking at it, which was funny and she was enjoying sniffing around in her new garden.



OOoooooooo

I came back in to warm up and sat down to see what was coming to the feeders. There were the usual 100 Chaffinches but then my eyes nearly popped out of my head and I shrieked, "**Crested Tit**" to Wendy. I was so excited about having Crestie straight off but Wendy sounded totally underwhelmed and just said, "Yeah" like it was no biggy! Who'd have thought that we'd have had Red Squirrel and Crestie from the house after only being up for a few minutes? This was exactly what we'd wanted from a HQ for years and I couldn't believe our luck. Wendy was still feeling rough and tired, so I'll let her off but she also loved the house and agreed (through gritted teeth) that I'd picked a goodie even if it was behind her back :P. Watching the comings and goings I commented that there'd been no Woodpecker yet just as one flew in and landed on the peanut feeder....Hahahaha! I then wondered why on earth I wasn't taking pics, so I grabbed my camera, opened the window, sat on the floor and waited for our plethora of wildlife to



return....Hahahaha! Wendy saw this as a good time to go and make her usual big pot of soup to keep her in meals for the rest of the week and it wasn't long before she was complaining that it was cold. The heating had gone off hours ago but if she thought she was cold she should've tried being in my shoes sitting next to an open window with no gloves on and to make matters worse it'd started to rain! I quickly realized that I needed put my hat and gloves on to sort this problem out!!



Best hide ever!

Lyca had claimed the comfy chair by the window and seemed to be just as interested as watching everything as we were, so Wendy had to pull up a wooden chair from the dining table.



Too much to look at

We heard **Crossbill** flying over and also the calls of a Buzzard overhead as we watched what was now 2 Cresties coming to the feeders. The conditions were a bit dark but I was managing to get some shots in focus.





Crested Tit



Coal Tit

I could've happily stayed there all day but we needed to go out, so I packed up at 10.15am. Wendy went off to do her teeth while I was getting changed and Lyca started barking. Wondering what all the fuss was about I looked outside to see a **Jay** up in one of the trees. It flew down onto one of the feeders then jumped down onto the ground and was hopping around under them. Only a few years ago we'd never have seen a Jay in the Highlands but these days we frequently do. Wondering what to do next I read some of the info in the folder provided by the owner and found 2 short loop walks from the house that we'd never done before. We never used to do any of our local walks but since we started to explore the walks from our doorstep a couple of years ago we intended to keep it up. The house was set in 20 acres of private Scots Pine forest, which

the owner is managing in the style of the RSPB to hopefully encourage Capercaillie in the future. It is next to the 200 acres of Abernethy Forest owned by the RSPB and we liked his ethos and thought his wood was worth looking around, so that was our 1<sup>st</sup> plan of the day sorted.

We left at 11.06am and the house and garden looked amazing with all the snow, so Wendy took loads of photos. It couldn't have been any more perfect if someone had asked us, "What do you want to wake up to on your 1<sup>st</sup> morning?"



Perfect

Strangely, even though it was a private wood it wasn't long before we found footprints in the snow. Someone had walked their dog in there earlier but we knew that the owner was friendly with the neighbours, so it may have been them. It was really quiet on the bird front and we didn't hear so much as a squeak but it was a pleasant way to start the day anyway. We came to a flooded section of path and managed to skirt our way around the outside by walking through the heather.



Flooded path

Next we found a group of beehives, which looked very strange being covered in snow!





Bee Hives!

By then I had a problem and my snow boots, which I hadn't worn for years, were rubbing against my ankle and making it really sore. Every step I took was painful and Wendy was of course as sympathetic as ever (not) and knew it'd only be a matter of time until for my 1<sup>st</sup> wardrobe malfunction of the trip. She showed me the metal hooks inside the bottom of her ski pants and suggested that maybe that was hurting me because I'd foolishly tucked that layer inside my boots. I pulled them out and carried on but it didn't seem to help at all and looked as though it was just the boot rubbing.....Grrrrrr! Lyca had her head down sniffing and was having a great time enjoying all the new smells but apart from a **Goldcrest** we saw and heard nothing. When we came to a small ford we had to cross it without getting our boots soaked. Wendy had her usual mass panic whilst I set off like Bear Grylls trying to find a way to cross the massive river....Bahahaha :P.



Massive river!

About 3metres further up and the gap was only about 2 feet so we were able to just stepped across it! Panic over :).



We then had another obstacle to overcome. Wendy and Lyca went through it no problem but unfortunately it was a different story for me. Even breathing in wasn't helping but I'm blaming all the layers I had on!



Squeeeeeeeze

We then found ourselves out in the open and heading towards what looked like a farm or hamlet. Apart from on the ground the snow had practically gone in this very flat sunlit area and it was like being somewhere else entirely.



Weird Hamlet

I found some hoof tracks in the snow and reckoned that a herd of Deer must've been through earlier. This seemed feasible enough, until Wendy laughed and pointed to flock of sheep grazing up against the fence. Maybe I'm not Bear Grylls after all.... Doh! There were some pretty big and very nice houses dotted around and given the location we felt slightly envious. The path came out on the road leading back to our HQ and I hobbled the rest of the way dying to take my boots off to relieve the pain. What was I supposed to do if it snowed for the entire week and I needed to wear them? I was very glad when we spotted the house and although it'd felt like we were in the middle of nowhere when



we'd arrived in the dark the night before it was surprisingly close to the road, albeit a tiny single track road.



HQ

As we wandered towards the front door we heard **Crossbill** flying over and in the porch I couldn't get my boots off quick enough! By then it was 12.14pm, so Wendy set about getting our lunch ready while I went outside to put some mealworms out and Lyca re-established prime position on her favourite chair overlooking the feeders. I got slightly carried away with tinkering with the feeder set up and when I finally went back inside I'd been gone so long that Wendy was wondering if I'd got lost in the woods. While we ate our lunch I spotted a **Treecreeper** on the feeding station, which was a surprise and made us wonder what else we could possibly add to the garden list. Wendy reckoned we could get the entire Thrush set, Long-tailed Tit, Redpoll, Dunnock and Goldcrest while I plumped for Song Thrush. I got a report of some Waxwings at nearby Causer (never heard of it), so having decided to take it easy for our 1<sup>st</sup> day that seemed like a good plan. It was cold in the house because there was no heating on and while we got ourselves ready to head out again a Long-tailed Tit flew down to one of the fat feeders.....Ha!

It was 1.29pm when we eventually found the motivation to go out and luckily I found out that Causer wasn't far away at all, it was just up a road at the back of Nethybridge. Strangely we'd never been on that road before and as I drove slowly up the street I spied a bird in the top of a tree in the garden of one of the houses.



Causer

A quick check of it confirmed that it was a **Waxwing** and I pulled over and parked up. Wendy could hear more calling nearby but we couldn't see them anywhere and the bird we had flew up the road to another garden further away. Wendy wandered up the road to try and find out where it'd gone while I got my camera out of the car. She managed to find it low down feeding on the very few berries left on a cotoneaster but it didn't seem to be impressed by them and flew up into a tree. All of a sudden the rest of the flock flew into a Larch tree back down by the car, so we hotfooted it back. Through our bins we could see that they appeared to be eating the small round buds of the otherwise bare branches, which was a different food source to the usual Rowan berries we usually watch them gorging on. While I tried to get a decent shot of them Wendy had counted 19 birds in total before they all took off and flew back up the road.....Grrrrr! Still not happy with any of my shots I decided to follow them but Wendy stayed by the car so that Lyca, who was keeping herself occupied by barking back to the dog in the house next door, didn't feel too left out. Wendy was trying to stop her being a nuisance when out of the blue 2 Spaniels came hurtling at full throttle out of the driveway opposite and ran straight across the road towards her. Feeling quite unnerved she held her breath while she waited to see if they were friendly or not but she needn't have worried as they were possibly a little bit too friendly! They both jumped all over her with so much gusto that they nearly knocked her over! Luckily their owner came running out and after several recalls they went back, so she breathed a sigh of relief and started to wonder where on earth I'd got to. I'd found a path down the side of one of the houses and had gone down it to explore. This gave me an angle on the Waxwings with the sun behind me but annoyingly they were all behind a pile of branches. When I got back to the car I was anything but happy with what I'd taken and had struggled to get any of the birds in the clear without branches in front of them or the sun behind them. When I got back to the cottage later and looked through the pics I realized I'd been a bit harsh on myself and had actually got an OK shot.





Waxwing

I decided I'd go back in the morning to try again when the sun would be in a more favourable position....if the birds were still there of course. It was amazing to have these birds all to ourselves though and it made a nice change not to have loads of other birders looking at and photographing them. Crazy! I put the news out to BirdgGuides anyway as I'm sure there would be other visiting birders in the area at that time of year who'd have loved to see them. It was still early, so we had to make a decision as to what to do next. I looked at the OS map and saw that the road carried on for a bit so decided to go and explore it. About a mile down the road I spotted a sign for a Nature Trail in a nice looking area.



Very nice

This was a new area for us, so we had no idea what it was all about, so I checked the OS map on my phone and found that it went up into a nice loop path through a forest called the Lettock Trail, which would do us nicely :).

I parked up and we set off at 2.45pm but although the sky was blue it was freezing in the forest under the shade of the trees.



Lettock Trail

Looking around us it looked really good for Caper, so we wandered around holding our breath at every turn. We could just imagine catching a brief glimpse of a female bird flying through the trees.....well we didn't want to aim too high and go straight in for a male strutting his stuff on the ground! While our eyes were fixed on the forest Lyca had obviously noticed that we weren't paying attention and had found something she fancied. Wendy looked down just in time to see her eating some kind of poo.

Nooooooooooooo :O! Last time she did that on holiday she'd at least sampled the delicacy of suspected Pine Marten poo but this was just plain old junk food dog poo.....Grrrrrr!

Disgusting animal! Having thought it'd be really quiet in there we were surprised to see so many other people walking around, which made it less of a surprise that there wasn't even a sniff of any Capers. We eventually came to a gate, which lead us out onto some fields with a cracking view of the snow covered Caingorms in the distance.





Scenic

A woman on a pushbike appeared and cycled past us, so it must've been a popular spot! It was pretty warm in the sun and although Wendy was happy I was too hot in all my layers and felt uncomfortable.

Back at the car it was 3.45pm and 8c, which felt more like 40c to me. I had a look at my Fit Bit and found that we'd done 14,800 steps during the day, which was more than we'd expected on our 1<sup>st</sup> day. Driving back past Causer there was no sign of the Waxwings but there was a photographer standing at the side of the road opposite the Nethybridge Hotel. I stopped the car to see what he was looking at but there didn't seem to be anything there. Wendy ran into the Nethybridge shop to get me a cake, eggs, a jar of peanut butter and some Windolene (to clean the kitchen window to make it easier to shoot through) and as I drove home we both realized that we were much more tired than we'd realized. All of a sudden we both fell off a cliff and felt like zombies, so we couldn't wait to get back to HQ. About 200m from HQ Wendy was still awake enough to spot some birds up in a conifer at the side of the forest so I pulled over. It was 17x Waxwings and most likely to have been the same flock we'd been watching earlier. Cool :).

By the time we got back to HQ it was 4.10pm and we trudged up the steps to the front door feeling like our legs were made of lead. Lyca seemed happy to be home too and headed straight for her chair in the kitchen. The Crestie was back on the feeders, so I quickly cleaned the dirty glass with the Windolene Wendy had bought from the shop. This made such a difference for me to be able to shoot through the glass and not freeze to death and hopefully better my shots.





Crestie

The Treecreeper came back and the feeding station was a hive of activity but Wendy had to start on tea. After Lyca was sorted she set about making ours, so happier with the shots I'd taken, even in the poor light, I packed up. While we ate tea we started planning our Pine Marten stake out. We knew that they'd come to the feeding station in the past and someone had mentioned them in the visitors book from the previous week, so it was just a case of putting food out and playing the waiting game. While Wendy was making a peanut butter sarnie and putting a dollop of peanut butter and an egg on a plate for me to put outside we heard a **Tawny Owl** calling outside, which is always nice to hear.



Piney supper

She then went off for a nice hot bath but she reappeared unnaturally quickly so I knew something was wrong. She was really annoyed because the hot water had run out while she was filling the bath so it'd been cold! I put the booster on and found it hilarious that she was so impatient she could wait for it to heat up before getting in it....Hahahahahah! We then positioned our chairs at the window, Wendy poured herself a spritzer and we

switched off the lights to start our long wait in the dark. Time passed super slowly and with every minute it got harder and harder to sit still and be quiet. By 7pm our eyeballs were being stretched to their limits and we could barely see the feeding station through the darkness. With everything now being black Wendy decided to go and dry her hair in the hope that something would happen while she was gone. Needless to say that it didn't and I gave up, shut the curtains and turned the lights back on. There was always my Dad's Trail camera to see if we could have any joy but when I checked it I was gutted to find that the batteries were flat, so that was another thing for the shopping list for tomorrow! He did warn me before I went that they needed replacing, if only I'd listened....Doh! I resigned myself to the fact that the excitement was over and took myself off for a shower before putting the dishes away. Wendy had been keen to put the electric blanket we'd brought from home on the bed but I couldn't be bothered the night before. She suggested doing it again, so reluctantly I gave in and we fitted it ready for later and went off to watch some TV. By 10.17pm we were nearly falling asleep so we packed up for the night and I have to admit that the electric blanket was much appreciated after a long day.

Monday 6<sup>th</sup> March

It was 7.25am when we woke up after 8hrs 50mins sleep! Looking outside the snow had all but gone and it was a bit overcast, which was disappointing but the egg and all the peanuts I'd sprinkled on the ground had gone :O! The peanut butter sarnie was still there though and I could've kicked myself for not being able to put the trail camera out to catch the culprit red-handed :( Urrghhhh! If the egg had gone from the table it must've been a Pine Marten, so I definitely needed to put it out later to get some solid proof. There was no sign of the Cresties or Red Squirrel until 8.15am, so when they did I opened the window and got in position.



Crestie

I thought that Wendy might like to join me and set the other camera up for her but after about 10mins she threw a brat-like strop and gave up.....Hahahaha! I managed to get a few shots of the Red squirrel in the nano seconds it stopped before bombing off again.





Red Squirrel

My grand plans of going back to Causer to better my Waxwing shots had to be ditched off as I'd found another local walk from the house up to Tore Hill, which was the hill opposite where we were staying, so I reckoned we should do that 1<sup>st</sup> to kick off the day.



Tore Hill

We left at 9.55am and set off down the driveway only for Wendy to realize she'd forgotten the notepad, so we had to turn around and go back. As we left for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time I noticed that I'd left the teleconverter in the wardrobe but Wendy, full of her usual optimism, said, "Don't bother you won't need it." As I wasn't taking my massive lens out and only the smaller 300mm to keep the weight down I pondered over it for a second and decided that she was probably right but really hoped that it wouldn't be a decision that came back to haunt me later. It seemed like too much of an effort to take my boots off, go and get it and put them back on again anyway.

We wandered up the road and past Tore Hill Cottage, which I'd always fancied staying in but have never bitten the bullet due to there being no photos on the website. The cottage



boasts Cresties, Red Squirrels and (.....drumroll.....) CAPER in the garden but without much info I'd never booked it. From what we could see through the windows as we walked past it looked surprisingly nice inside (compared to the rubbish photos online) but when we spotted people in their dressing gowns in the kitchen we looked away very quickly. Awkward! As we approached the garden Wendy said, "HmMMM, have they really got Cresties?" I located the feeders and instantly replied, "Yes!" We had them coming to our garden, so we didn't feel too jealous but the forest it backed onto looked really good for Caper, so that made me wonder if we should try it next time. There was a **Dunno**ck in the garden too, which was new for the trip but given the fact that the occupants were in we didn't hang around.

Finally we came to the gate leading into the forest and straight away we were hearing more birdsong than we had done on any of our previous walks. This forest was obviously doing something right, which made the claims of Caper even more feasible. Three **Mistle Thrushes** flew over noisily and within just a couple of minutes we started to see Cresties up in the trees. They were there in good numbers and as we stared up into the treetops we could just imagine a Caper up there. Wendy was on fire with her poo finding skills and she found some containing sunflower hearts, so whatever it was had been to a nearby feeder and probably one of Tore Hill Cottages!



Poo

She reckoned it looked good for Pine Marten and kept a close eye on Lyca, just in case she was feeling peckish.....Bleurrghh! I found a pathway into the forest, which had obviously been made by some kind of animal and lead up to an exposed rocky mound.





What's up there then?

Optimistically I imagined finding a Badger sett or Fox den, so I went off to investigate. Wendy hung back with Lyca while I walked up to the top of mound having seen nothing remotely as interesting as I'd hoped. All I found was the boney remains of a Deer, which hadn't gone to waste and interestingly its limbs were scattered all over the place and nowhere near the main body.



Very dead Deer

Wendy found some poo (again) and we heard some Crossbills calling but they had a strange 'accent' so could've been Scottish Crossbills. We headed back after that and when we got back to the gate we spotted some small birds flitting around the gorse bushes.





Bird bushes

When we looked closer it was in fact 3x Cresties, which having never seen them in such an environment before, surprised us. I grabbed my camera but my heart sank when I realized that I really needed my teleconverter and I'd stupidly listened to Wendy and had left it at the house.....Aarrghhhh! The distance was too great for a little 300mm but I took a shot anyway. It turned out OK but when I think of what could have been.....Urrghhh!



Crestie

Wendy wanted to have a look around another cottage we'd found but although it looked like it was vacant I made sure she didn't get too close, much to her disgust. This one had a lovely balcony looking over the great views as well.



Nice cottage

From this position looking back towards our HQ we could see just how vast the forest was we were staying in.



HQ is in the first dip/gap in the green conifers.

It was 11.59am when we got back to HQ and we'd walked 3.72miles so far and both of us were feeling pretty tired. There were 2 Red Squirrels at the feeders, so we watched them for a while before having lunch. By 1.07pm we managed to find enough energy to go out again and I made a detour to the Boat of Garten shop so Wendy could get some batteries for the trail camera later. She was gone for ages and I was getting impatient as our plan was to go to Dulnain Bridge for Dipper, Findhorn Valley for Eagles and then Lochindorb for Red Grouse. When she came back (with a few extra bits!) it turned out that the woman had put £2000.00 into the till instead of £20 and it'd taken her a while to sort it, so I let her off for being so long. I reckoned I knew my way to everywhere by now, so decided not to bother using sat nav.....hardcore or what?

Approaching Dulnain Bridge we passed an angry looking Scottish woman who was waving her arms and shouting at the cars driving down the road. Very strange. At the layby there was no Dipper on the river, which didn't exactly surprise us.





Dulnain Bridge

We carried on continuing to see nothing apart from a squished Fox in the road :( I successfully got us past Goose Road, which isn't its official name, but one we made up seeing as it's always caked in 1000's of wintering geese. Next up was Carrbridge and as usual we admired Packhorse Bridge as we drove through. Interestingly it's one of only three remaining bridges of its kind left in Scotland and celebrated its 400<sup>th</sup> Birthday this year!



Packhorse Bridge

I was very impressed with myself to find the Garbol turnoff without sat nav and we headed through the never-ending road through Findhorn valley. It wasn't anywhere near as snowy as we'd expected it to be until we got further down and Wendy spotted some **Red-legged Partridge** at the side of the road. There was a red-head **Goosander** on the river and some **Golden Plover** and **Lapwing** down in the fields. She also found the tiny shapes of the just about visible **Red Deer** right up on top of the hill.

I parked up in the car park at 2.32pm and it was just as cold as we'd imagined it'd be.





Findhorn Valley

Findhorn is NEVER warm, even in summer (just like Strand Street in Douglas) and there always seems to be a biting wind blowing through the valley. Looking around, as we set off the conditions didn't appear to be right for any Eagle sightings with the wind and low cloud shrouding the biggest of the hills in the distance.



No chance!

We carried on regardless and continued scanning the sky as we went. There was a bloke coming towards us with 2 dogs, which were both on leads, so Lyca's ears pricked up. As we passed him she and a small black Terrier type had a bit of a bark at each other but nothing too bad. He was friendly and kept the dogs close to him and commented that they weren't his, so we presumed he must've been walking some residents from the kennels. Sure enough, he headed up the path towards what must be the most remote dog kennel in the UK and we didn't envy him having to go out walking in the valley multiple times each day! Surely on some days it must get so bad that dog walking is out of the question? It was particularly quiet on this occasion and there wasn't much going on at all, which didn't do anything for our lack of enthusiasm in the cold! Wendy did her usual trick of spotting some **Red Grouse** right on top of the hills in the snow, which were just tiny specks and not worth looking at. They flew over the side of the hill and while



she watched them she caught a glimpse of a big scruffy looking bird with its wings  $\frac{1}{2}$  folded. This bird also disappeared over the side and Wendy was left wondering whether it'd been an Eagle. The view she'd had wasn't good enough, especially as we hadn't even seen a Buzzard yet to get our eye in but the jizz was right for an Eagle. Urrghhhhh! We waited for ages in the hope that it'd reappear but it didn't so we carried on before we froze to death. A bit further along and scanning to furthest hills Wendy was onto another big bird, which I thought I had in my bins but she decided it was probably just a Buzzard. I carried on looking and thought it was too way big to be a Buzzard especially when it glided along close to the side of the mountain. It was at this point that we realized we were looking at 2 different birds entirely.....Oooops! I tried to get Wendy onto my bird but they were both so distant that it was impossible and although I suspect mine was a Golden Eagle I can't be 100% sure either, so can't claim it. We decided to walk over the bridge and as far as the corner where all the action had been so we could get a better view of where our birds had gone. When we got there, there was no sign of anything.



Come on Eagles!

After Wendy had scribbled some notes up and I'd had enough of scanning we started to walk back. Wendy spotted a large flock of Finches flitting about amongst an area of trees, so we stopped for a look. They were **Redpoll** and it was the biggest flock of them we've ever seen being made up of around 40 birds. She finally found some **Wild Goats** but after much searching gave up on looking for the white blob of a Mountain Hare. Gamekeepers had been out in force shooting them because they believe that the ticks they carry are affecting the millions of Red Grouse they put out to be shot. The extent of their efforts looked to have basically wiped them out completely from an area we'd never failed to see them before. Needless to say we were gutted :( All the way back the wind was behind us and the sun had come out, so we were boiling, which was better than being freezing I suppose.



Lovely

Back at the car it was 3.56pm and we had one more place to visit before calling it a day. Just as I was about to set off a yellow bus came hurtling down the road towards us. I stayed in the car park to let it pass and unbelievably it was a School Service dropping the kids from the kennels off :O! By that I don't mean that they keep the kids in the kennels but the owners have kids...Hahaha :P. After seeing the speed he was driving at on the tiny single-track road I let him turn round and go ahead of me and he'd left us behind in a cloud of dust in no time! With health and safety being the ruler of every kid's day at school these days we were surprised at its apparent absence when returning them home! Maybe people have a death wish in those parts. I breathed a sigh of relief when after a very long 20mins I joined the main road again. We saw a Red Kite and wished it luck, as its chances of lasting very long in an area that's rife with murdering Gamekeepers were pretty slim :( When I successfully got us to the turn off to Lochindorb I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The road was closed and had a barrier across it, so I had to turn around.....Boooooooo! The bloke from a house on the corner was out trying to round up his chickens that had had escaped and were running loose in the road but somehow I don't think that's why it was closed :P. After working out a new route and Wendy protesting that it was too much hassle and it was getting late we binned the idea off. There was nothing to gain by going there, as we'd already seen Red Grouse and it was too early for any Divers anyway.

It was 4.57pm when we parked up outside HQ and we were tired, so not going to Lochindorb was probably a good move. Wendy gave Lyca her tea before starting on ours. Afterwards Wendy went for a bath, which was hot enough to cook a lobster in this time....Phew! I had a look at the weather forecast and it looked as though the best day for us to go to Cairngorm was going to be tomorrow, so at least we had a plan made, albeit for us! I put the trail camera out and baited the feeding station with an egg, sarnie and lots of peanuts, so we were excited to see what (if anything) would be on it. After that I was so tired I decided to leave unloading the dishwasher until the morning because by 9.33pm we were all more than ready for bed.....Hahahahaha!

Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> March

After our ridiculously early night we were amazed at how much sleep we'd had and didn't wake up until 7.20am! Unfortunately the egg and the sarnie were still on the feeding station but all the peanuts had gone from the ground again. Someone was very hungry last night and we could only see it being one thing. There were a couple of new



birds for the garden in the form of Woodpigeon and Redpoll but we wanted to see what we'd caught on camera. While Wendy made the days lunches I had the tedious chore of going through 160 x 30second videos! I'd set the camera on high sensitivity, having learnt from Ardnamurchan last summer, so we didn't miss anything and it'd been going off all night with the slightest movement.....Doh! Finally though I saw what I was looking for and we had indeed captured our peanut muncher and had footage of a **Badger** stuffing its face....Woo Hoo!



Badger

There was also a **Wood Mouse** giving it a helping hand to polish off every last morcel. Result! :). There were 2x Jays in the garden as well as the usual Red Squirrel and Crestie but we wanted to get out and about a bit earlier this morning.

It was 10.08am when we left HQ and only 1c, which was mild compared to some of our March trips in the past. Firstly we took a spin past the Loch Garten feeders but there were people at the feeders and a campervan parked up right in front of them, so we didn't bother. A Red Squirrel ran across the road by some lodges at Coylumbridge and a Tornado jet flew over Loch Morlich, which looked quite impressive.

At 10.44pm I parked up in the relatively quiet lower car park at Cairngorm and Wendy, after shouting at me for not parking in the top carpark, trotted/slid off to the toilets before we started our walk. It was really snowy and had become very compacted from all the people walking on it, so looked like it was going to be hard going. She met an old birder up there who was looking for the reported Snow Buntings but he hadn't seen them yet. She came back down to the car to get her bins and we set off at 11.05am to see if we could find them, they should've been hanging around somewhere nearby. We wandered through the lower car park and up in the top one we spotted another old bloke looking down and pointing at the bank to our right. We looked up and scanned until we eventually found 2x very well camouflaged **Snow Buntings** feeding amongst the remains of the dry grass. We walked up to the top car park and joined him for a much better view of them and I left Lyca with Wendy and went to try for some shots.



Looking for Snow Bunts

It wasn't easy at such a tricky angle but I ended up with a record shot.



Snow Bunting

After that we carried on and were instantly stopped by a car full of birders asking about the Snow Bunts. We were getting nowhere fast so quickly directed them onto where they were and carried on. We'd only got as far as crossing over the river before the ski lift when we looked back to see some birders all pointing upwards. There was a huge flock of Snow Bunts including lovely white ones which were flying straight towards the picnic area in the top car park.....Urrghhhh! If only we'd stuck around for a few more minutes! This must've been the reported flock of 31 birds from the day before but they didn't settle though and seemed very flighty. They lifted off almost straight away, flew over us and then disappeared off up the mountain and into the distance. The old guy Wendy had spoken to was nowhere to be seen, so he must've missed out on seeing them entirely, so it could've been worse. Excitement over we started our climb upwards but it soon became clear that it wasn't a very good idea for Wendy to attempt it.





Ski lift

It was so icy and when her foot slipped it sent a painful jolt up her back, so instead of risking an injury that would ruin the rest of the holiday she decided to quit while she was ahead. It was a shame but definitely not worth the risk, as it looked far more treacherous further up where I hoped the Ptarmigan would be.

She took the car keys off me and left me and Lyca to it, warning me to turn back if it got too bad.



Heading back to the car park

She went to the shop and bought a toy Badger (to mark the occasion of getting one on the trail camera) and a mini bottle of whiskey then to the café for a cappuccino. She then headed up to the picnic area and found that all the Snow Bunts were up on the wall feeding on seed that had been put down for them. She got so close to them before they flew off and she found a seat that was far enough away from them and made herself an Irish Cappuccino to warm up with and waited for them to return. There were people sitting right next to the seed and the birds were still coming back, totally unfazed by them but by then she'd also noticed that Cairngorm had been engulfed in thick clouds and she started to worry.

It was quite easy going to start with as the snow on the path had melted but as I got further up the snow was compact and slippery.



Daunting

Luckily enough I'd learnt from last time and this time I'd brought my Yaktrax with me so when I reached another compacted area I stopped and put them on over my shoes. I'd never worn them before but was absolutely amazed at the difference they made. I'd hoped they'd be OK but they were way better than that and I was able to travel over ice and compacted snow no problem at all. Lyca, with her 4 paw drive, was having no problems either so we continued on. I could see the section I needed to get to where I expected the Ptarmigan to be but the snow was now starting to get very deep and there was no sign of a path.



Errrr?

With each step I was sinking deeper than my knee, which was making it very hard work and Lyca was also sinking to her belly.





Snow dog

Suddenly I saw a Grouse sized bird and for a nano second I hoped it was a Ptarmigan but annoyingly it was just a Red Grouse.



Red Grouse

Realising I was still only at a height where Red Grouse were, meaning I couldn't be anywhere near high enough up for Ptarmigan, I finally decided to call it quits and turn back. I hate giving up but it was still early in our holiday and I didn't want to be so shattered that it'd mean I was too tired for the rest of the week. Luckily enough, just to cheer me up I had Lyca going beserk in the snow! She was jumping around and purposely sliding all over the place :).



Mad dog!

We also were getting some cracking views as well.



Nice!

Wendy had got so cold sitting at the picnic table that at 12.37pm that she had to go back to the car to warm up. This is when she spotted the mountain rescue team going up the side of the mountain and she'd started to think all sorts.....Uh oh! At 1pm I got a phone call checking that we were OK, which we were.....Hahahahaha! Wendy even managed to get a photo of us coming down the path!





Spot Pete and Lyca!

It was 1.20pm when I got back and it'd started snowing, so I'd timed it to perfection. I drove up to the top car park to eat lunch so we could watch the Snow Bunts and we chuckled when a photographer started chimping and all the birds flew in and landed right behind him :P. After I'd finished my lunch I reckoned I should go up to the picnic area for a pop at some shots.



Lying low

I lay on the ground and was instantly soaked but luckily the birds flew in and I fired some shots off.



Snow Bunting

Annoyingly the lovely black and white ones never came very close to me. There was a couple of people by the other wall who had them right in front of them but they didn't have cameras, which seems to be the secret :( Wendy had been watching them coming and going and while she'd been trying to count them she'd exceeded 31 and it was looking more like 50 birds! It was so cold by then and I was soaking, so I gave up and went back to the car to thaw out. It'd been great to see so many Snow Bunts but disappointing that I hadn't been able to get up high enough to find any Ptarmigan but you can't win every time. We left at 2.24pm and I wanted to try another new place that we'd attempted to go to in the past but had to pass on, due to the mountain rescue dogs being there training.

At 2.24pm we arrived at the Hayfield car park and luckily this time it was empty. I went over to pay £2 for a ticket and heard a Crestie without even going anywhere, which was a good sign. I'd checked the map on my phone and it looked like we could do a lovely little loop path, which was very handy. We all set off through the entrance and along a footpath through a forest, which lead down to a river.





Riverside path

We followed the river and were very pleased to finally come across a very nice **Dipper** perched on a branch of an overhanging bush. I handed Lyca over to Wendy and slowly edged my way towards it for a photo but it was impossible to get it in the clear whichever way I approached it. Eventually it flew across to the other side and landed perfectly! The problem was I'd been extremely lazy and had only brought my P900 out on this walk, as I'd expected to see nothing at all. In the dark conditions it really struggled and was putting on tons of noise reduction on the jpps which even on the minimum setting is still too much.



Dipper

Kicking myself for being lazy, I vowed to go back there with my proper gear, as the river was so small but still massive compared to a Manx river. If it perched in the same spot I'd easily get my best Dipper shot ever. Further down and the river ran into Loch Morlich and there was yet another Dipper on a branch right at the river mouth.



River mouth

This one, although even closer, was literally impossible to get a shot of, so I gave up pretty quickly. By then Lyca was pulling on her lead desperate to get onto the beach for a paddle, so we took her down. She looked like she was happy as she paddled around with her tail raised high in the air wagging frantically.



Paddling

She'd probably have stayed there all day if we'd let her but after Wendy had admired the view and taken some photos we started to head back.





Loch Morlich

The Dipper was still there and we watched it diving into the water, bobbing up again and swimming back to its branch. It was still in a bad position for photos as was the other one further down, so I didn't even bother.



So near yet so far! (point and click shot)

I'd planned a loop walk and thought I had it sussed, until we found ourselves looking at a stream in a really boggy area. It was too water logged to jump it and there was no way either of us were taking our shoes and socks off to paddle across in March, so we were stumped! The only way across we could see was via a very thin fallen tree, so Wendy went 1<sup>st</sup> using another tree trunk to grab while swinging herself across.



Hmmmmmm?

While I attempted to replicate the maneuver Lyca simply jumped across with a loud, “GRUNT!” We were now faced with more water logged bog with streams running everywhere we looked, so we squelched our way around them as best we could using the higher grassy tufts as stepping stones. We’d already worked out that we’d somehow gone the wrong way but hilariously we spotted the path a few yards away, so had been doing it the hard way needlessly.....Doh! When we got back on track we followed the path through the forest and climbed up a hill. It was weird, neither of us remembered going down hill to start with and after my Cairngorm walk another hill wasn’t a welcome sight! We were back at the car at 4.02pm and I was knackered, so I reckoned I deserved a decent tea.

A Eurofighter blasted over the hills as I drove to the shop at Boat of Garten, where Wendy nipped in to get me some square sausage and some rustic bread rolls. Just after we left and I was driving down the road towards the forest another Eurofighter flew over but then I had to slam on my brakes in blind panic when a Red Squirrel ran, out of nowhere, into the road and under my wheels!!!! :( I felt sick as the car came to an abrupt stop and Wendy, who hadn’t seen it got the shock of her life and squealed, “What?” I jumped out and looked underneath the car totally expecting to see a mortally injured Squirrel lying there half squashed but to my utter amazement there was nothing..., I couldn’t understand it. I checked everywhere, both wheel arches, the grill, under the car but there was nothing at all!!! It must have just missed my front right wheel and in the nano second of me slamming on the brakes gone under the car, behind the front left wheel and miraculously out the other side..:O!! I don’t know who should’ve felt more lucky! I’d have been devastated to have hit any animal but a Red Squirrel would be a disaster. Wendy was oblivious to all of this so later on I showed her the dashcam footage and she fully understood why I’d turned as white as a ghost at the time!!





Lucky Squirrel!

Looking behind me when I pulled off I could see the lucky little creature sitting on a fence, so it'd had a narrow escape and would live to tell the tale. Wendy hadn't been able to get any bird food at the shop, so I stopped at the one at the caravan park further along the road, where she had more success. Approaching the house we saw a dead Badger at the side of the road and just hoped that it wasn't the one we'd had in the garden! :(.

It was 4.52pm when we got back to HQ and Wendy started to unpack the bags in the kitchen in preparation for tea. Lyca was standing on her back legs with her front paws up on the dining table wagging her tail. When we looked more closely we found that she was obsessed with the toy Badger Wendy had bought earlier and just wouldn't leave it alone. She was staring at it then at us expectantly over and over again and could've been forgiven for thinking it was a new toy for her but it wasn't. In the end Wendy had to get me to remove it from the room and hide it in the wardrobe before she drove us both mad. As usual Lyca was fed 1<sup>st</sup> but this seemed to take her mind off the Badger and she vanished into the living room with her dentastick. My square sausage rolls were just what the Dr. ordered and we even had some sachets of Heinz tomato sauce in the car to top it off nicely.....Om nom nom :).

While Wendy went for a bath I charged all my devices and could hear the Tawny Owls calling outside again. I had a bath next and then finally settled down to watch some TV and relax. I went to show Wendy my Go-pro videos from the Cairngorm walk but found that all the files had disappeared! I couldn't even recover the files and it felt like I'd imagined it all....Mental! I put the trail camera and food out again and by 10.15pm we were done for and turned in for the night.

Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> March

We were up 7am and after I'd taken Lyca out for a wee she ran straight back to bed and went to sleep! I checked the night's footage and was pleased to see the Badger there again, munching away on peanuts. This was good enough for me but when I saw something appear on the right of the screen I held my breath. It ran across the parallel tree at the top of the screen and towards where I'd put the egg revealing itself as a **Pine Marten!**



Pine Marten Bum :)

It grabbed the egg and was off in a flash, so I excitedly showed Wendy who was equally as ecstatic.....Woo Hoo! Badger and now Pine Marten.....Double whammy! :). That was it, tonight we were going to try and stake it out again and hopefully see it in the flesh! I decided to experiment with the Go-pro and set it up outside and connected to it via my mobile. That way we could see when the Squirrels came in and one had already paid us a visit. It came back for a 2<sup>nd</sup> time but by the time I'd logged in it had already scarpered, so I missed it! I opened the window again to try and get some shots instead and sat in wait with my camera.



Smiley Red Squirrel

By then it was raining but I was totally engrossed in the comings and goings. The 2x Squirrels were seemingly having a fight and chasing each other around up and down the



trees. The Treecreeper came back and I focused on trying to get a decent shot of that. While I was concentrating something caught my eye in the trees to the right of the window, so I had a quick look. I wasn't prepared for what I saw and would never have imagined seeing a flock of 9x Waxwings landing in the forest outside our HQ :O! I shouted to Wendy who was over in a flash and we watched the birds feeding in the bushes and trees at the back of the garden.....unbelievable!



Waxwings

This was more like how we could imagine they behave in their breeding grounds and it looked really odd. It was nothing like how we're used to see them gorging on the berries of a Rowan tree at the side of a busy road or the middle of a housing estate! The whole scene blew us away but it was far too brief and they quickly moved off and vanished on their never-ending search for food. Another Squirrel came in and joined the pursuit putting our garden count on 3 individuals and perhaps some kind of courtship or territorial behaviour? The Crestie came back too but after a while Wendy reminded me that we needed to get going. While Wendy packed up the lunch bag I went over to the chair Lyca was lying on and sat next to her to give her a big hug. As I sat down there was a cracking sound instantly followed by a loud horrendous yelp from Lyca :O! I jumped up in horror and Wendy's head spun round faster than something from The Exorcist! Lyca hobbled and limped across the floor and we both feared the worst, that I'd broken her paw or leg :( I felt physically sick and was checking Lycas leg for any sign of a break. She looked as though she was in a lot of pain, which I'd never seen before as she's a tough little cookie. After about 5 minutes of panic she started to reduce the limping and eventually was OK, so much so that she was standing up on her back legs dancing! We both breathed a massive sigh of relief and eventually put it down to a bit of a shock rather than any injury. By that point it was already 10.30am and far later than we'd planned on going out (Ooops), so we hurried out to the car and set off.

Luckily it'd stopped raining by then but we weren't sure how long it'd stay dry for us. As the forecast wasn't the best we'd decided to go and drive an hour north and explore the coastline east of Inverness, as we'd never done it before even though it has some great birding locations. As it's coastal we had a good chance of adding a load of birds we

wouldn't see in the Highlands and it would be a complete change of scenery for us. It was a scenic drive too and I was very impressed by the Nimrod on display outside Kinloss Barracks. Wendy tried to get a drive photo but it didn't turn out very well to say the least!



Nimrod

There was a weird little area of allotments just down the road and Wendy wondered it that was where the Hippy Community she'd heard about years ago lived.

Shortly after that we turned a corner and had our 1<sup>st</sup> view of Findhorn Bay, which was a lot bigger than we expected.

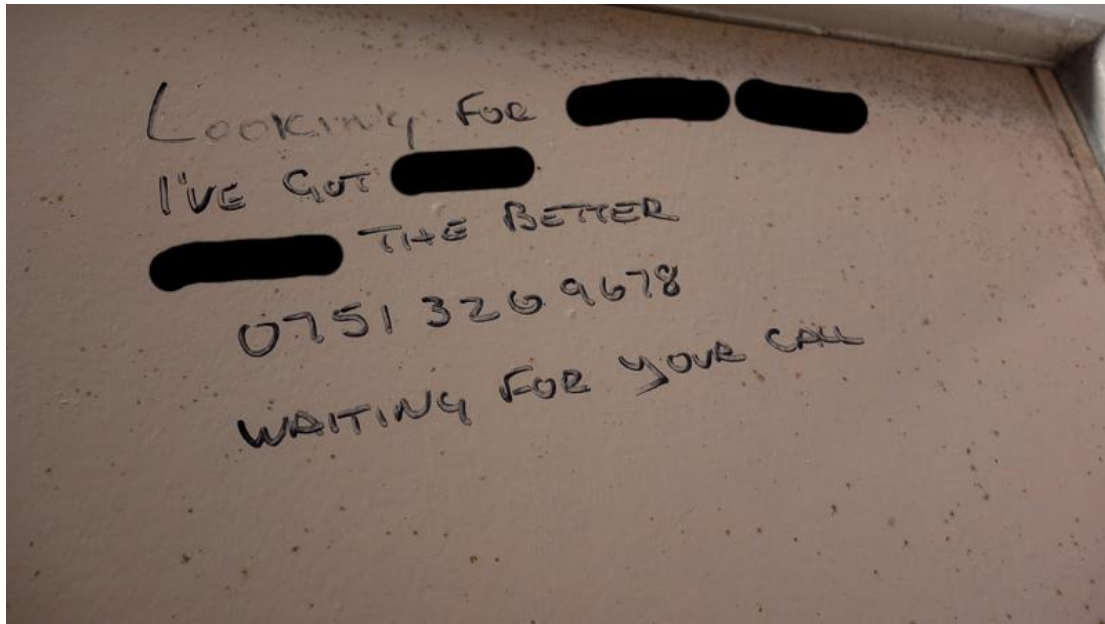


Findhorn Bay

There'd been Slav Grebe, Long-tailed Duck and Velvet Scoter reported off the beach there the day before but 1<sup>st</sup> up for us was a **Curlew** down on the beach. Wendy made me pull over for a scan and I spotted a very nice male **Long-tailed Duck** but it was too far off to call the view decent. Wendy had spotted a huge flock of Ducks even further out and we stared at them trying to get an ID. I poo pooed them as being Common Scoter but Wendy wasn't having it and eventually she caught a glimpse of some features and



concluded that it was the biggest flock of **Pintail** either of us had ever seen! We didn't even try and count them there were so many and with them bobbing up and down on the waves it would've been impossible. I carried on down to the beach and found the car park. Wendy spotted a WC and I spun back round and parked up outside so she could go in. When she came out she was grinning, pulled her phone out of her pocket and showed me a photo she'd just taken of the graffiti on the toilet door.



Censored version!!!

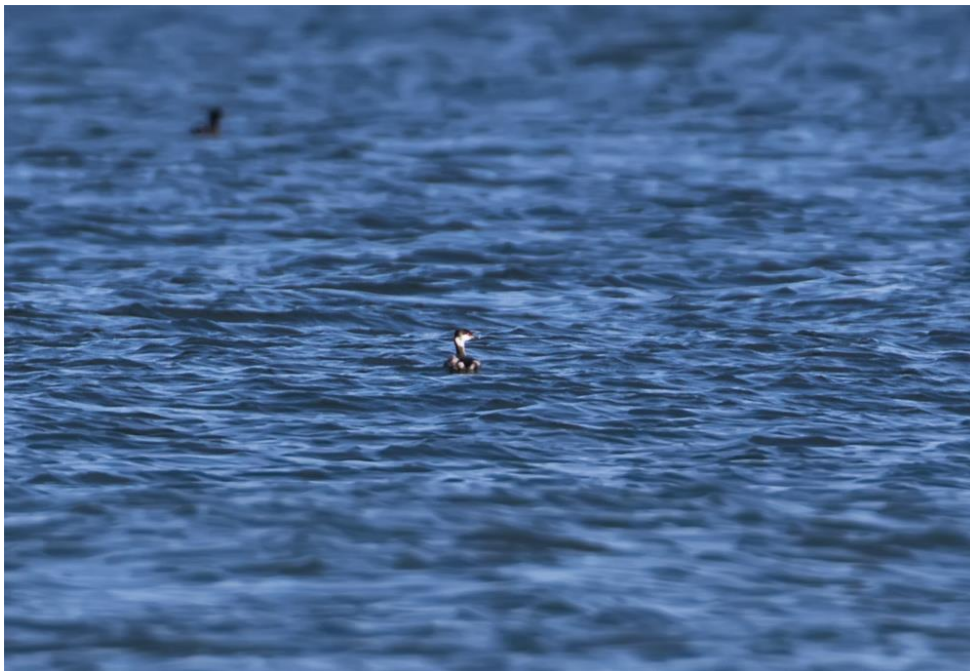
There was a **Kestrel** sitting on the tin roof of a hut, which was duly chased off by a Crow and I thought I may as well pay the WC a visit before our walk too and went into the Gents. The graffiti in there was equally as bad but as I hadn't taken my phone in I didn't get a photo. As I went to leave I found that the lock was stuck and I couldn't get out and but didn't have my phone, so I couldn't even call Wendy :O! I started to panic and looking at the graffiti again I just hoped that I'd be able to escape before 2pm on Sunday! There was no way to pull the door from the top and there wasn't any room to get down to get my hand under the door at the bottom. After what felt like 5 minutes of racking my brain I finally managed to squeeze my foot under the door just enough to pull it backwards. I finally freed myself and ran for my life back to the car and drove away quickly to find a park as far away as possible....Phew!

It was 11.48am when we all got out and made our way down a steep shingle ridge to the beach. It was a pretty impressive sandy beach that stretched for miles and it wasn't raining either, so we were all happy.



Findhorn Beach

Looking out to sea we quickly spotted various large flocks of **Common Scoter** bobbing about and diving for food. There were also **Ringed Plover** down by the tide line, **Eiders**, **Gannets** and a **Grey Seal**. After a few minutes Wendy got a bit excited when she announced that she had the **Slavonian Grebe** and started trying to direct me onto it. I hadn't even managed to find that yet when she called out **Razorbill** as well. I found them both and tried to get some shots of the Slav between dives without much success because it was too far away.....Typical!



Slavonian Grebe

While we were scanning through the Scoters we noticed that there were a few **Velvet Scoter** amongst one of the flocks. I turned my attention to them to try and get a record shot at least but they were miles away and kept diving.





Velvet Scoters

When one of the flocks lifted and started to fly over the sea I fired off a few shots in the hope that there'd be some Velvets in with them. When I looked at my pics I was disappointed to see that the birds had all been Common Scoter, so I gave up.



Common Scoters

A couple of birds flying over caught my eye and when I got my bins on them I saw that they were **Red-breasted Mergansers** and got Wendy onto them. The Slav and Velvet Scoters were just not playing ball, so we turned around and headed back. Wendy wanted to get some photos of the line of beach huts, which turned out quite moody with the incoming black clouds behind them.



Moody

These were new huts and although I cant see why anyone would want to go for a beach holiday this far north I googled how much the huts were and was amazed to see they were selling for £60,000 :O. Hahahaha.....mental!

We headed back over towards the inlet seeing a female **Stonechat** in the dune grasses by the boats in the harbour.



Harbour

There was an actual **Hooded Crow** down on the beach, which we hadn't expected and on the other side of the inlet were loads of Grey Seals basking on the sand.



Findhorn Bay inlet

It was weird to see a tiny inlet of about 100ft that opened out into a 5mile circumference bay. By then the massive dark cloud had hit us and it started to rain again, so we put our hoods up and scuttled back to the car. It was 12.42pm when we shut the doors to shelter from the now heavy downpour and we left to find somewhere suitably scenic to eat our lunch.



Just before Kinloss Barracks Wendy spotted a Hippy type on a pushbike battling against the wind and rain. He wasn't wearing highly practical synthetic waterproofs, oh no, he was clad from head to toe in 100% natural wool, so we hate to think how wet he was getting! Wendy was convinced that she'd finally found the Hippy Community and this was confirmed when she noticed a sign saying "La Boheme" at the entrance to the allotments/caravan site. It's actually a well-established Eco-community called the Findhorn Foundation, which is built on ley lines and celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> year in 2012! You can actually go there to stay for a holiday if that's what floats your boat :P.

I'd found a place just up the coast called Burghead, which looks west but when we arrived it could at best be described as the Hunstanton of the north! The book said that it's 'the' place to look for Sea Duck flocks but as we were looking straight into the deluge it was a bit impossible.



Burghead

There was a **Bar-tailed Godwit** on the sand but apart from that there wasn't much about, so I drove over to the other side. This was called The Maltings and at 12.12pm I parked the car up next to an old boat to view the sea.



The Maltings

There was instantly more to see from there and scanning the rocks below us reminded us of the Port St Mary lighthouse rocks, so we scanned for Purple Sandpipers. The best we could pull out was some **Turnstone** and a **Shag** but out to sea there were 6x Red-breasted Mergansers and a nice Long-tailed Duck. We sat eating our lunch watching them and added nothing new apart from a **Redshank** but then it started to chuck it down.....Urrghhhh! I'd hoped that the Long-tailed Duck would come close enough for a decent pic but it stayed too far out for anything decent so I had a pop with the P900 on full zoom (in the gloom!).



Long-tailed Duck

As we left we came across a massive factory right on the shore side so I grabbed a photo. I'm not sure what the place is for but for want of any better ideas I'm assuming some sort of fish factory?



Big Factory!

Having exhausted the area we left and added **Feral Pigeon** to our list before arriving at a place called Hopeman.



Hopeman was a bit of a Ghost Town of a place and considering it was 1<sup>st</sup> called Duff Street I wasn't surprised. The residents must've renamed it because they were clinging to the last remains of hope they had left! Wendy was rather taken by the harbour and beach though and got out to take some pics.



Hopeman beach

There were some WC's there, which she paid a visit and we quickly left before we too lost all hope. I decided we'd continue east and try Lossiemouth next, as there'd been a couple of White-winged Gulls hanging around the river mouth. We also had 3 car parks to visit to see what we could find from, so it didn't matter too much if it carried on raining.

It was 2.19pm when we arrived in Lossiemouth and I parked up in the 1<sup>st</sup> car park to view the west beach. The sun was out and it all looked very nice but apart from another Long-tailed Duck there was nothing.



Lossiemouth west beach

Call us ungrateful but we had seen so many LTD's over the past couple of hours that we didn't bat an eyelid and we couldn't find any interesting Gulls, so we moved off. I

couldn't find the seafront car park, where an Iceland Gull had been reported, so I carried on to the one at the river mouth. Just before we got there we saw a ridiculously long footbridge going over the river mouth to what looked like the dunes.

The expense to build that bridge just so people could walk to the dunes seemed massively excessive but I can only assume there's been a bridge there for a long time for people to get to their fishing boats on the shore or something?



Lossiemouth massive foot bridge

I parked up and our jaws nearly hit the floor when we saw the amount of Gulls we had to go through! It was like Gull soup!



A small fraction of the Gulls!

There were some **Wigeon** in there too but try as we might and in difficult circumstances we couldn't find the Iceland Gull. While we were scanning I noticed a scummy looking bloke walking across the mudflats towards the river and I cursed him for flushing all of the birds trying to roost. I had to eat my words though when I then saw that he was actually wading through a load of mud and probably Gull poo to retrieve a plastic bag



that'd blown down there....Oooops! I hadn't put two and two together at all until we saw 2 Eurofighters coming in off the sea and flying over the town to land at the RAF base was a pretty cool sight. Of course, RAF Lossiemouth, the base of Eurofighters. Stupid me! Luckily enough they were doing a touch and go so I was able to get some photos of them climbing away.



Eurofighters

By then a bloke flying a kite had flushed the majority of Gulls further up the river, so it was pointless looking any more. While we had a brief final scan Wendy chirped up with, "What's that in with the Knot?" The what? She actually meant to say, "in with the Redshank" so when I looked and saw a **Knot** in with the Redshank I wondered why she hadn't just said so! At least we'd added something else new before we left. A couple of Tornados flew in and looked like they were going to land but at the last minute they lifted up and did a fly by and went round again.



Tornados

We left at 2.47pm and had 1 more place to visit before heading back to The Highlands. I'd read about RSPB Loch Spynie before and while we were in the area it would've been rude not to visit.

At 3pm I turned up a farm track and thought my SatNav had gone nuts again. I parked in the muddy farmyard and scratched my head, thinking, "Surely this isn't right?" Wendy pointed to the sign for Loch Spynie, so we got out of the car and tried to skirt round as much of the mud and cow poo as we could. Wendy doesn't like being too close to farms and rushed off when she heard the squealing of Piglets nearby. We walked down a footpath and at the end was the hide overlooking the Loch. We hoped it wasn't busy and were pleased to see only 1 other birder inside. I had a look at the reports book and saw that there was a Scaup, so set about finding it.



Loch Spynie

There were loads of distant Tufties and most of them were asleep, so it wasn't easy. Finally I found the **Scaup** with its head tucked in asleep and got Wendy onto it. There wasn't much else about but the old guy in there was very friendly and gave us some good info on what we'd expect to see and where in the area as well as correcting us on



the pronunciation of some local names. When the Scaup woke up I set about getting some shots for the article and ended up with this one.



Scaup

Four Eurofighters took off and noisily blasted over, so we'd done well for planes during the day. Loch Spynie was a really odd place but it's good to see it's there and hasn't been drained away to make more farmland. We called it day and made our exit from the hide, which had been a bit disappointing. Maybe we were there at the wrong time of year or something? We left at 3.30pm and stumbled across the **Whooper Swans** we'd been told wintered in the area in a field. Driving through Elgin Wendy wanted to have a look around having wanted to visit there since our 1<sup>st</sup> trip to Scotland. I wasn't so keen, it looked big and the roads were busy, so I drove straight through the middle of it, which didn't please her at all. It started to rain again, so we'd been lucky to have dodged the worst of it during the day.

We drove through Tomintoul at 4.42pm and I parked up down in the car park by the Forest. The walk had been closed due to it being unsafe last time we'd been there and although I toyed with the idea of going for a wander we quickly dismissed it. We were too tired by then, so we scanned to hills opposite for Black Grouse instead. This was fruitless and all we saw were the very dark Pheasants birders are warned about in my book.....Boooooooo :( Wendy found a very distant **Roe Deer** and that was it, so we left and carried on through the town. As we drove down the street a Red Kite flew over, which wasn't what we'd expected to see at all. Approaching Nethybridge the Waxwings were at the same place at the side of the road and there were a few birders hanging around admiring them. Wendy nipped into the shop to get me some more baps and we finally arrived back at HQ at 5.28pm.

Lyca was starving, so as usual had her tea 1<sup>st</sup> and I enjoyed my 2<sup>nd</sup> night of square sausage baps.....Om nom nom :). After tea and Wendy had been for her bath I baited the feeding station again for our 2<sup>nd</sup> Pine Marten stake out attempt. This time I put an egg in the usual place under the birdhouse but I placed another on top of a bracket fungus growing out of a vertical branch. My thinking was that it'd be easier to spot the Pine Marten there. Clever eh? At 6.50pm we switched all the lights out, got into position at the window and waited. We watched for any sign of movement in the forest until our eyes felt like they were out on stalks and we'd started to see things! For some reason the garage light, which was activated by sensor, kept going on and off, which we

reckoned could be slightly off putting for any shy animals out there. There was also a full moon, so it seemed lighter than it had been on our 1<sup>st</sup> attempt so at 7.45pm after seeing nothing we gave up :( This was depressing, as we'd started off quite optimistic and then we started to feel sad because we knew our holiday was coming to an end and we didn't want to leave. Our last chance of doing an early start for Caper would be tomorrow, so by 9.26pm we'd had enough and went to bed.....Zzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> March

For reasons unknown to anyone Wendy woke up at the ungodly hour of 4.59am, so she got up and made herself a cappuccino. She then put her electric blanket on and went back to bed to drink it in comfort. Lyca didn't stir at all even when we both got up at 6am and she was still panned out asleep, so we didn't disturb her. We had breakfast and Wendy made the sarnies then peered out of the curtains at 6.34am to see how light it was. Unbelievably both the eggs I'd put out had gone.....What the? Aarrghhhhh! It was snowing outside and Lyca was still away with the fairies in the bedroom. That was until I went out to get the camera and she heard the door open and came trotting in to go for a wee. When I came back in I had a quick flick through the video footage from the night before and was amazed to see the Pine Marten come in and swipe the egg from the bracket fungus in the blink of an eye. That thing couldn't half move! We couldn't believe it but were gutted that we'd missed it :( It'd obviously been back for the other egg but the camera hadn't got that for some reason. The day was off to a bad start and we had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't going to get much better for a while. Lyca wouldn't eat her breakfast, so it'd have to wait until later when she'd hopefully worked up more of an appetite.

We set off later than planned at 7.15am and it was 2c and raining and we arrived at Forest Lodge at 7.25am.



Forest Lodge

Most of the drive was down the really bumpy track, so Lyca was panting like mad in the back and letting us know that she wasn't happy. She'd probably have been happier staying in bed for the morning and maybe she already knew that our visit was going to be a waste of time. Our hearts sank when a woman driving away went past us, so we knew that there'd already been human disturbance. Some Crossbills flew over as we set off down the footpath into the forest and we saw 2x Goldcrests feeding frantically in the bushes next to us.





Abernethy Forest

We caught the arse end of a Deer leaping into the cover of the trees and there seemed to be more Crossbills in there than we'd ever had before. The next thing we heard was the sound of an engine and a \*\*\*\*\* van came round the corner from the same track we were going on.....Nooooooooo! This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> time this has happened and with the woman from earlier we gave up all hope of seeing anything for rest of the walk never mind a Caper! The sun came out and it was a very pleasant walk, which we decided we'd continue with despite knowing we'd be leaving empty handed. When we got nearer to the Caper zone we started to feel a bit more optimistic but then we saw a bloke with a Black Labrador coming up behind us. Bah! Lyca went nuts, so we had to let him go past so he was now going to be the 1<sup>st</sup> to walk up the path that would've been our best chance of seeing a Caper.....Grrrrrrrr! It was probably already too late when we'd arrived anyway, so we didn't stand a chance and instead we recounted our 1<sup>st</sup> Caper encounter, which is still the best to date. What a memory it was too! In one of the puddles on the track Wendy spotted something very odd and she pointed it out to me. There was a huge clump of frogspawn in that puddle but obviously if there was a dry spell it or a van like the one we'd seen earlier drove down the path it was going to be history.



Stupid place for Frogspawn!



We wondered what kind of parent would do that and then I spotted the culprits lying low at the bottom of the puddle. There were 2x **Common Frogs** in there, who were surely the worst frogparents ever and should've been ashamed of themselves!



Daft Frog

I was so annoyed that I went in search of something to put over the puddle to alert any passing RSPB vehicle that something was amiss. Unfortunately the Abernethy Forest isn't well known for its sign making section, so the best I could come up with, given our location, was a big dead branch I found up on the bank and I positioned it in such a way as to create an obstacle.....sorted! Whether it worked or not is anyone's guess and we'll never know but the frogspawn could easily have been moved to somewhere more suitable. If only we'd had a bucket with us! You're probably waiting for the suspense story to end and to read about how we finally came across an amazing male Caper but we're afraid it didn't happen :( Back at the car it was 9.09am and 4c and we headed straight back to HQ.

It was 9.21am when we kicked off our boots and went in to warm up feeling deflated on our last full day. I looked at my Fit-bit and we'd already done 10,000 steps but it didn't feel like it. I had a proper look at the camera footage and found that if we'd waited 8mins more we'd have seen a Badger! Why hadn't we stuck it out for a bit longer? Urrghhh! The Pine Marten had come in at 12.45am and by that point the bird table egg had already gone BUT there was no footage of that...very strange. The 1<sup>st</sup> Red Squirrel on the scene was at 6.21am when it would've been pretty dark still. Lyca finally decided to eat her breakfast and then went to relax on her chair to watch the birds and wait to bark at the Squirrels.





Lazy

It was still early and we had no plans for the rest of the day, so I looked into a reported Hawfinch at Grantown-on-Spey. That would be a great bird to see and I found out that it was in some trees by the river on a walk we'd never done before. It sounded like a plan to me and Wendy was happy to go along with it...sorted :). As it'd probably be my last chance I tried for some more Crestie and Squirrel shots out of the open window while Wendy thought she'd write our comments in the visitors book.



Red Squirrel

By the time I'd packed away she'd managed to write our names and was staring at the page blankly.....Doh!

We set out again at 11.08am making a detour to the Nethybridge shop to get us some chocolate and drinks. When Wendy was getting back in the car the Waxwings flew over, which was very nice to see. We'd certainly had our fill of Waxwings over the week and

had even had them in our garden :). It started to throw it down but within a couple of minutes the sky was blue and the sun was out again.....Phew! It wasn't just us that needed the sun as we passed a Church having a funeral. Whoever it was for must've been very popular as there was a huge line of cars parked on both sides of the road! Next we saw a sign for "Ladies Garden Wood" and couldn't resist having a bit of a giggle :P.

I eventually found the Hawfinch area at 11.46am but it was just a case of finding somewhere I could park. It didn't look as though we could get anywhere near the footpath but I parked up in a layby a bit further down the road. When I got out of the car Wendy pointed out that I had melted chocolate from the Boost bar she'd got from the shop all over the back of my trousers. Brown stains on your trousers is obviously not a good look for anyone, so I grabbed a baby wipe from the dash and removed as much of it as I could before anyone came. We walked down the road and down to the river but we'd gone the wrong way and had to turn back. We found some steps at the side of Old Bridge which took us down into the field, which was more like it. There was a river running through it with some fishing huts dotted along it and with the sun out it was very picturesque.



River Spey

We leisurely followed the river through the fields until we came to the trees where the Hawfinch had been reported yesterday. Wendy found it amusing that I'd even entertained the idea of it still being there but you've got to be in it to win it, as they say.





Hawfinch trees

We scanned all around the area and even made sure we knew the call of a Hawfinch from Wendy's phone app but there was no sign. I saw a Dipper whizz down the river and very quickly lost it but luckily Wendy found another perching on a branch overhanging the river right next to us! It started to rain again, so obviously the sun went in and it was far too dark to get any shots but I tried anyway.



Dipper

We found yet another bird further up, so after years of struggling for Dipper on our Scotland trips we'd done really well for them this time, which hopefully will continue. We couldn't believe how many molehills there were in one of the fields to our left and I even got Wendy to get a photo.





Molehills

When the sun came out again we found ourselves in the back of Grantown Woods, which looped back to the car. It was boiling in there and we were well overdressed, so were sweating buckets! Unfortunately Grantown Woods is a popular place and very quickly we came across a dog off the lead. I quickly zipped Lyca off onto a side path and then distracted her with little treats. This worked perfectly and she never even spotted the other dog! We found a pool that looked like it had potential to be good for Dragonflies but we'd have to revisit it during summer to test our theory.



Dragonfly pool?

Although Wendy reckoned I'd managed to get us lost my map reading skills were on fire and I got us back to the car without having to resort to walking on the road.....Ha!

By then it was 1.25pm and the walk had been 3.02 miles and 7,000 steps meaning we'd walked 8 miles and done 18,000 steps in total so far. We reckoned we deserved our



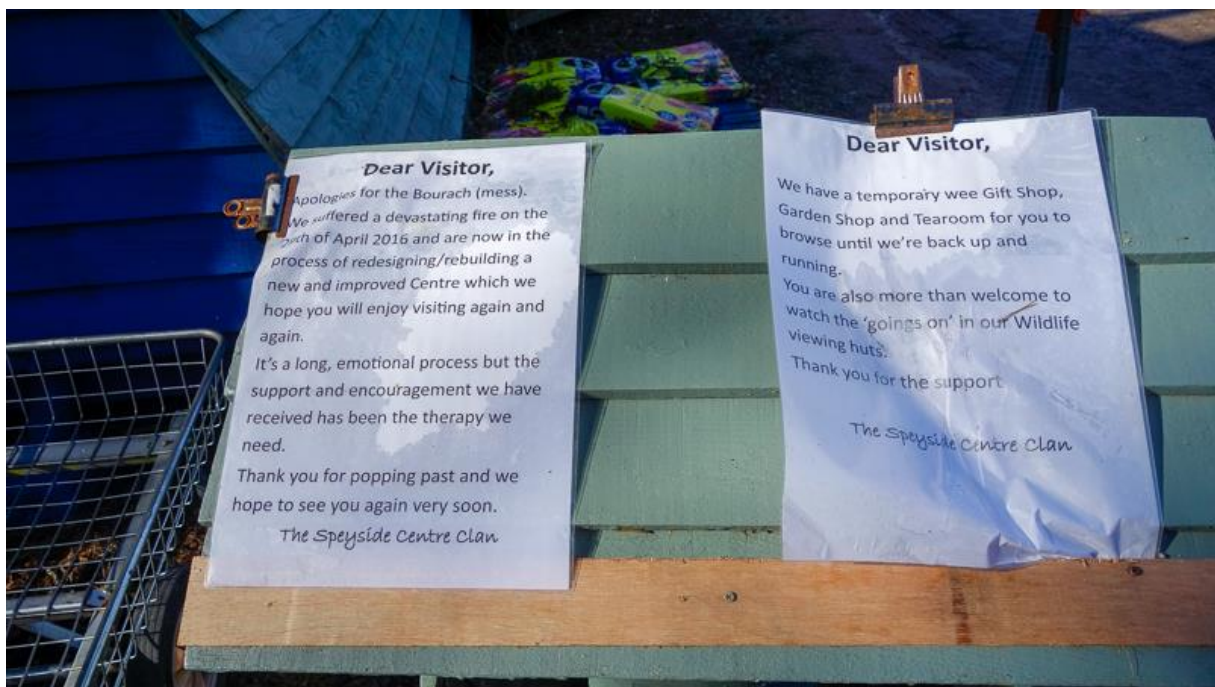
lunch after that and sat back to relax for a bit leaving at 1.51pm. We didn't really know what to do next but I needed to get some pressies, so that was our next plan.

I pulled off the A9 into the entrance to The Heather Centre and we both looked around in total confusion. Where was The Heather Centre? It should've been sitting in front of us but it appeared to have been flattened!



Eh?

It was very popular with coach tours and must've done a roaring trade with the Clouty Dumpling Café and Gift Shop, so it just didn't make sense. There were a couple of very new looking sheds to the left and then Wendy spotted a notice that answered all our questions. It'd burned down!



Oh dear!

This had happened a month after we'd been there in March last year and they still hadn't started to rebuild it. Surely that's not a good sign? We left Lyca in the car and took a



wander over to the sheds, which were serving as temporary shops. One was the gardening stuff but they didn't have the Mega feeder I was after and the other was the Gift Shop and Café but the stock was so limited due to lack of space that I came away without anything. What a shame, those poor people :( We felt quite sad as we drove off and just hope that they manage to restore the Centre to its former glory soon. I drove to Aviemore next to fill my tank up with petrol in preparation for the journey home tomorrow. Whilst filling up I noticed a sign that said they were closing for months for refurbishment in a few weeks time! Imagine if it'd been shut when we arrived at the start of the week? I would've been well goofed then. After that Wendy suggested trying Rothiemurchus Visitor Centre since it was nearby. Although I'm not of fan of there because it's too busy, overpriced and poncy I didn't have much choice. As usual it was full of people browsing the extortionate gift shop and deli and I'd much rather have been giving my custom to the Heather Centre but we both found a couple of bits and bobs and went off to part with too many pounds.....Grrrrrrr! Seeing as we were so near and had run out of ideas I reckoned we should go back to Hayfield so I could try for a last minute Dipper shot with proper equipment.

We arrived at 3.08pm and I went over to get my ticket and noticed that it was displaying the wrong time.....Uh oh! I stuck it in the window anyway and hoped for the best and we all got out. All of a sudden I had the horrible thought that I'd shut the doors with my car keys still inside the car! The car would've locked itself by that point and then I realized that for the 1<sup>st</sup> time ever I hadn't given Wendy my spare set to put in her rucksack for such a dilemma. Nooooooooooooo! I panicked and fumbled around through all my pockets until I found the key.....Phew! That could've been a total nightmare! While all that was going on a very young and boisterous Cockerpoo and its owner were in the car park and the puppy was off the lead. Wendy thought that Lyca would be OK with it being another Cockerpoo but it was so hyperactive that I think it got on her nerves and she grumpily put it in its place. We walked down to the river again and the Dipper was still hanging around in the same spot.



Round 2

I crept closer to get some pics while Wendy wrestled with Lyca who was up on her back legs dancing to get to me. The light wasn't the best but I still managed to get an OK shot, which was handy seeing as it was my last chance!





Dipper

After that we carried on to the beach where there was no sign of the other Dipper but Lyca pulled me all the way to the water for another paddle.



Last paddle

We turned back feeling deflated and reluctant to leave such a beautiful view behind us. Looking at the river we saw the Dipper, which hadn't been there when we'd got there, swimming towards its bush at the river mouth. I handed Lyca over to Wendy again and made my over but there were too many twigs in front of it....Grrrrrr! It flew across to the other side where it was too far away and the sun was behind it, so it was impossible to photograph. Wendy was in a better position than me and zoomed in for a point and click shot....Hahahahaha!





Spot the Dipper

I gave up after that and we headed back wishing we didn't have to leave.

We'd managed to fill the day better than expected and it was 4pm when we got to the car. Considering we'd run out of ideas by 2.30pm we thought we'd done quite well. Wendy wanted to go for a look at and get a photo of Loch Morlich as we drove past, so I pulled into one of the car parks since I already had a ticket from the Hayfield Carpark. There was a Goldeneye really close in, the closest I'd ever seen one, so I got my camera and slowly went up to the edge while it was diving. Wendy was frustrated because there was a very loud woman from the south of England talking to a bloke and blocking her view. They needed to move if she was going to get any photos! She took one of me to bide the time and although it looks like a photo of some Mallards there's me and a Goldeneye in there somewhere!



Loch Morlich



The problem was that the woman just wouldn't let the poor bloke go and every time he'd start to back off and walk away she'd step closer and start rabbiting on about something else. He looked pained and desperate to get away but she had other ideas....Women! Wendy stood there willing her to shut up but she was full of more hot air than a hot air balloon! Urrghhhhh! In the end Wendy just took a photo and made do with it. I was very pleased with my Goldeneye pic though, my best to date so it'd been a worthwhile diversion.



Goldeneye

We spun past the shop at Boat of Garten so that Wendy could buy a mini Prosecco as commiseration for having to leave. A random woman in a field waved at us as we drove past, which we hadn't had since The Hebs and we pulled up outside HQ for the last time at 4.48pm :(.

Although the last day is always a sad one I like to put a positive slant on it and considering all the uneaten food needed to be used up before we left I rose to the challenge.....Om nom nom :). I put the trail camera, Go-pro and food out for the last time and Wendy put some washing on, went off for a bath and then started to pack up our stuff. I started to sort things out and took an electricity meter reading for the owner but I couldn't find the one for the oil. I got really confused about how much extra I was meant to pay him and the instructions weren't making much sense. After it went dark I went to wirelessly connect to the Go-pro so I could see what it was seeing. This was my cunning plan to get a nice photo of the Pine Marten but it wouldn't connect?

N0000000! If I went out to see what the problem was I ran the risk of scaring everything that was nearby away. In the end I decided to not risk it, so I just left it out doing nothing. I had a search online and it turned out that if the Go pro goes to sleep after its set time, you can't connect via the network.....Urrghhh. If I'd known that before I would've kept connecting every 15minutes just to keep it awake. Oh well. While we were busy packing up Lyca had decided to take herself off to bed, which was unusual. She usually likes to be with us in the evening, so we concluded that she knew we were going home and was feeling as depressed as we were :(. Seeing as Wendy still hadn't got any further than writing our names in the Visitors Book I had to scribble a few words down for her. She just had a mental block and didn't even know where to start with it. The place had just been too good and she started contemplating a lock in tomorrow

morning when kick out time came :P. She wrote them up and left the book on the table and we finally sat down to watch a bit of TV. By 9.45pm we'd had enough, it'd been a long day and we needed to be up and out by 10am, so we went to bed :(.

Friday 10<sup>th</sup> March

Having wanted to stay in bed as long as possible I found myself awake at 6am, which wasn't the best start to a very long day! I finally got up at ½ hour later but Wendy and Lyca didn't surface until 7.14am, so I let Lyca out for a wee and brought the cameras in.



Back garden

The Pine Marten had come in at 8.01pm and taken the egg when we'd been busy packing up.



Gotcha!



If only we'd done another stake out, but it was too late now and we wouldn't get another chance :( There were 2x Cresties at the feeders but I didn't have time to get my camera. Lyca was looking very depressed as though she knew we were leaving.



Sulking

She wouldn't eat her breakfast, so Wendy took it over to her chair and after some gentle persuasion she finally ate it. This meant that Wendy could pack up her bowls and food for later. Wendy carried on tidying, cleaning and packing up and none of us wanted to go. The house had been the best yet with its amazing setting and wildlife and we could've done with another week or 10! I remembered that the owner had said that he'd try to get round before we left at 10 to meet us, so I was quite keen to get going before that happened (I'm not a people person!). When I'd loaded up the car and Wendy had taken photos of the inside all that was left to do was say a reluctant, "Goodbye" to our amazing HQ.



Living room





Kitchen

I took Lyca out, Wendy picked up her rucksack, had a final look around and we shut the door. As I drove away at 9.51am I looked at Wendy and instantly burst out laughing. She had a tear running down her face, so I called her some suitable names and she soon pulled herself together. I have to admit though, that out of everywhere we've ever stayed this one was the hardest to leave by a mile.

The 1<sup>st</sup> thing I wanted to do was see if there was any action at the Loch Garten feeders, so I headed straight there. It was raining lightly when we pulled up and no sign of any Cresties. We couldn't even hear any! There was an interesting notice board that had been put up by the RSPB educating photographers about what they should and shouldn't be putting at feeding stations for Cresties.



Good info

We felt really bad because even we'd been guilty of putting peanut butter out for the Pine Marten! A tour guide and his group turned up and made their way over and Wendy



reckoned that the guide was the bloke from the Pine Marten Hide a few years ago. Wendy being true to form decided to go off and have a “moment” on her rock at the side of Loch Garten.



Loch Garten

After she'd completed “momenting”, with nothing else going on we left and interestingly we came across a few photographers at the side of the road, a bit further down, who seemed to be having more luck. There was a feeding station set up and they seemed to be getting shots, so maybe that's the best area now?

Next I'd found another new walk for us to try, which was at the end of the road that we'd stayed on in Boat of Garten. Although we'd done the local walk from the garden of our HQ “Mallachie” into the forest and to Loch Vaa we hadn't done this section. I parked up at the end of the road at 10.45am and we set off into the forest. Apart from the call of a pair of Crossbills it was so still and peaceful in there that Wendy wanted to stop time and stay there forever. When we got to Loch Vaa Wendy scrambled down the bank to the waters edge, and took some photos.



Loch Vaa

Two Great-spotted Woodpeckers flew over but we couldn't stay there forever and had to make a move. On the way we heard Crossbills calling and when we found one of them it turned out to be a juvenile, which I took a poor record shot of.



Crossbill

It flew off with an adult and as well as Dippers we seemed to have seen more Crossbills on this trip than previously :).

Back at the car it was 12pm and we'd done 11,200 steps, which was pretty good for a travel day. It seemed like a good place to have our lunch too, as we had a nice view into the forest. This proved to be a good move because a Red Squirrel appeared up in a tree and kept us entertained while we ate our sarnies. We didn't want to but at 12.24pm we had to get going and I think we'd done well filling in our time before the long drive to



Heysham. I still had one more thing to look forward to though and that was a visit to The Potting Shed at Inshriach Nurseries for some cake....Hahaha!

At 12.45pm I parked up and we ran over the road to the best cake shop ever. Obviously I had to have a piece of Lindt Chocolate Cake but I also fancied something else. I was gutted to find that every other cake there had cream or loads of fruit on it so I didn't know what to get. Wendy made my mind up for me and got some Carrot Cake, which I wasn't remotely interested in. If she thought I was eating a cake with vegetables in it she had another thing coming! Wendy nipped to the Ladies and was pleasantly surprised to find that the old toilet in the back of the shed had gone and there was now a brand new and very plush toilet block. They must be doing OK if they could afford that! Again, because it was nearby and we hadn't been there yet I wanted to visit Inshriach Woods. We had no idea if the Caper was even still there after being told there were rumours of it being relocated due to constant disturbance from tour groups, but it was worth a shot.

We arrived at 1.01pm and Wendy had already started to get twitchy about needing to get going. It was too early to drive to the pub and we didn't have anywhere to visit on the way down, so I wanted to make the most of our time in Scotland as possible. This was only a short walk anyway, so we set off through the trees and I discovered that I'd left my bins in the car.....Doh! I ran back to get them and we carried on with Lyca happily jumping over the fallen trees like a horse. Wendy found 2 more poos, which really did look like they were from a Pine Marten. When we got to the top of the hill we were knackered and for some reason the walk didn't seem quite as short as we'd remembered it.



Phew!

Instead of going straight to the Caper spot we reckoned we should turn left and walk through the forest where we'd had them in the past. It was very peaceful in there, which on one hand was very nice but on the other meant we saw nothing! When we got to the top we lost the path and in front of us was the rocky face of a hill.





Now what?

Wendy was adamant that if we kept going parallel across the top of the forest we'd come out where we'd found the mound last time. Usually I do the opposite of what Wendy says but for reason this time I just went with it. The ground was uneven and we weaved our way through tree after tree and it wasn't long before I started to regret listening to her....Doh!



Well and truly lost!

It did look good for Caper though and we could just imagine one flying between trees. Wendy saw a large bird and in a moment of optimism, which got our hearts racing for a second, said, "Oo oo oo" (like a monkey) then in a totally deflated tone, "Buzzard" Urrghhhh :( Our hearts sank as we watched the Buzzard slowly fly through the trees and then to top off our downer we realized that there was no way we could continue the way we were going. I had a look at the map on my phone and decided that we'd have to turn 90 degrees to the right to cut through the trees and hopefully meet one of the proper forest tracks. This sounded straight forward enough in theory but the forest



floor wasn't the easiest of things to walk on with its thick carpet of moss and unevenness. We clambered down a steep mound and up the side of another hoping to see the path but there was nothing but another steep mound in front of us. Every time I checked my map and thought we'd find the forest track I was totally wrong. Grrrrrrr! Getting lost in a forest wasn't what I'd planned for on the way to Heysham but we kept going knowing that the path had to be somewhere ahead. After repeating the process several times and becoming confused as to how far we'd walked when we'd got lost compared to how far we'd walked to try and get back on track I finally spotted the track.....Phew! I raced down the last steep bank and threw my arm in the air in celebration.....Yey!



Yey!

Back on track we walked to the end of the path where the Caper used to be seen but there was no sign of him. We took a wander up to the mound but only found a small amount of poo, so it didn't look like the area was being used like it had been last year.



Caper poo

Unfortunately we'd failed to see Caper again but the walk had been a great way to fill in the time, although a bit more eventful than we'd bargained on.

Back at the car it was 2.45pm and we were suitably tired having done 20,028 steps by then. We ate the cake we'd bought earlier and then I drove back to the Potting Shed so that we could use the WC's before starting the journey down south. I checked my sat nav and it was saying we'd be arriving at the pub at 8.11pm, which was far too early, so we needed to kill time somewhere on-route. All of a sudden I became aware that my shoulder was really sore especially when I was changing gear. This was slightly worrying given the long drive I had ahead of me, so I tried to ignore it and set off at 3.20pm. The journey didn't start well with a dead Red Deer Stag at the side of the road when we were stopped at some lights followed by the rain setting in and consequently loosing all our views just north of Kenmore.



Kenmore, just before heading up the hill

We saw a **Brown Hare** in a field at Kenmore though and a Bullfinch while we were going up the really steep single-track road to Amulree. It was like driving through pea soup up there, which made me have to reduce my speed to a snails pace in case of any oncoming traffic.





Amulree

On a sunny day, the views are spectacular but on this occasion they were practically non-existent. We started the descent hoping that the conditions would improve lower down but we weren't hopeful. By then we'd seen several Red Grouse so when Wendy and I both spotted a dark shape at the side of the road ahead we both just mumbled, "Red Grouse" and I carried on driving. As we got level to it, out of the corner of my eye I suddenly noticed that it looked very dark and quickly glanced across. We both looked at it and were totally stunned, not to mention speechless, when we realized that it was in fact a **Black Grouse**! I slammed on my brakes in blind panic which meant I stopped about 10m down the road. Instead of carefully getting out of the car there and grabbing some shots, for some unknown reason I reversed up the road back to where it was standing. I think this was my brain telling me to double check!! Luckily we weren't losing the plot and it was a fine specimen of a Black Grouse just 10m away, so I grabbed my camera and cautiously got out of the car. I was really close to it and as soon as I raised my camera and got the bird in the frame.....it flew off!! Nooooooooooooo! My head started to flood with thoughts in sheer disbelief that we hadn't clocked it straight away. If I'd just stopped the car and fired back up the road at it, so as not to spook it, I'd have got a shot.....Aarrghhhh! After having just had my best ever encounter with a Black Grouse I'd failed epically to get a decent shot and could've kicked myself! :( It will go down in my ever-expanding list of once in a lifetime photo fails :( All I got was a flight shot of it flying away into the gloom. Urrghhh, how depressing.



Full frame! Showing just how close the bird was. :(

To say I was gutted would be an understatement and to this day that moment still comes back to haunt me. With the bird having well and truly cleared off I gave up all hope and left to go to the Black Grouse spot we usually go to. This is probably another reason why we didn't clock the Black Grouse like we should've done, because we were at least 2 miles away from the only spot where we've seen them on that road. There were some **Canada Geese** in the field by the Loch and it was 5.15pm when I stopped in the layby.

We wound the windows down so we could hear but by then we reckoned Lyca might need a wee, so I took her out. After she'd performed I got her bowl and dinner out of the boot and handed it to Wendy who had the veggies in the lunch bag to mix with it. Lyca just looked at it with no interest whatsoever and curled up on the seat again, so we left it with her and ate ours to the sound of Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatchers all around us. There were no Black Grouse in the usual spot but Lyca finally decided after 5 minutes to eat her dinner. When her bowl had been washed and packed away we left with nothing else to do but get to the pub. Just after we set off for some reason I opened my window and was positive I could hear a distant Black Grouse. We scanned and scanned but couldn't find one anywhere! I started to think I was hearing things when eventually we found the culprit very far away. We hoped we were onto a lek but after looking everywhere there was no sign of any other birds.





Spot the Black Grouse!

It was 5.54pm when I drove away and we saw our 1<sup>st</sup> **Mountain Hare** of the trip and considering we were leaving was a pretty good indication of the extent of the totally senseless cull :( There were 3 more dead at the side of the road too. We stopped again in Yellowhammer layby so that Wendy could change her trousers before we got to the pub and set off again at 6.48pm. It was 8.39pm when we hit the “Welcome to Cumbria” sign and we knew we were on the home straight.

It came as a massive relief to finally park up outside The King’s Head in Ravenstonedale at 9.34pm.....Phew! We were glad to sit down in the corner by the fire after doing 133,000 steps during the week.



And relax

Once we’d stopped we started to fall off a cliff rapidly and felt really tired, so stringing a sentence together that made sense became a challenge. A lady passing by admired Lyca and said she was, “Lovely!” but she inevitably ruined it, by jumping on her and got a telling off from Wendy. After sitting like a pair of zombies until 10.50pm I’d had enough

and wanted to get going but Wendy wanted to string it out for as long as possible to reduce our tedious wait at Heysham. I couldn't stand it any longer and just wanted to get the last part of the drive done, so we left.

The inside of the car windows were filthy and had been bugging me all week so I made use of my time and gave them a quick clean, which brought our leaving time to 11.06pm.....Skillz :). It was 10c when we left and compared to the temperature in Scotland it felt positively balmy...Hahahaha! The new Lancaster bypass was easy to negotiate and we were at Asda to refuel the car at 11.49pm. When we got to Heysham it was 12.15pm and I stopped at the car park 1<sup>st</sup> so that Wendy could nip in to use the WC's before we went down the ramp and were stuck in the queue. Going through the check in I was handed an A4 size piece of paper with a load of rules and regulations regarding dogs on it. That must've been a new policy or something because we've never had that before? We joined the queue for our tedious wait to board and Wendy fell asleep and was snoring loudly next to me.....Grrrrrrr! As usual the foot passengers were called 1<sup>st</sup> at 1.15am but we had to wait until 1.38pm. Boooooooooo! The cabin was a welcome sight and Wendy and Lyca went out like lights while I lay there desperately trying to go to sleep but failing miserably :( There was a crying baby next door, so when the announcement came to disembark I'd hardly slept at all!



Home time!

We were very glad to get home at 6.03am and Wendy and Lyca went off to bed for more sleep while I stayed up. I did the unpacking and then started to edit the scenery photos, of which there were many! Lyca slept for the rest of the day and didn't look remotely like she wanted to go out for a walk, which was handy.....Hahaha :). During our week away I'd driven 1,019 miles in total, which was more than expected considering how late we were going out. We had seen 90 bird species which was higher than normal for March but that's because we went to the coast this time.

We could easily have spent most of our time sitting watching the comings and goings from the cottage. It was by far the best place we've ever stayed and that alone made the holiday for us. All we can do now is cross our fingers that we can stay there again next year ! :).



This map shows the Cairngorms National Park area in Scotland. Key locations marked include Inverness, Findhorn Valley, Findhorn Bay, Grantown Woods, and the Cairngorms National Park. The map shows roads, rivers, and various settlements.

Mute Swan	Moorhen	Fieldfare
Whooper Swan	Coot	Song Thrush
Pink-footed Goose	Oystercatcher	Redwing
Greylag Goose	Ringed Plover	Mistle Thrush
Canada Goose	Golden Plover	Goldcrest
Wigeon	Lapwing	Long-tailed Tit
Teal	Knot	Blue Tit
Mallard	Bar-tailed Godwit	Great Tit
Pintail	Curlew	Crested Tit
Tufted Duck	Redshank	Coal Tit
Scaup	Turnstone	Willow Tit
Eider	Black-headed Gull	Nuthatch
Long-tailed Duck	Common Gull	Treecreeper
Common Scoter	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Jay
Velvet Scoter	Herring Gull	Magpie
Goldeneye	Razorbill	Jackdaw
Goosander	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Rook
Red Grouse	Woodpigeon	Carrion Crow
Black Grouse	Collared Dove	Hooded Crow
Red-legged Partridge	Tawny Owl	Raven
Pheasant	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Starling
Little Grebe	Meadow Pipit	House Sparrow
Slavonian Grebe	Pied Wagtail	Chaffinch
Gannet	Waxwing	Greenfinch
Cormorant	Dipper	Goldfinch
Shag	Wren	Siskin
Grey Heron	Duncock	Lesser Redpoll
Red Kite	Robin	Common Crossbill
Buzzard	Stonechat	Bullfinch
Kestrel	Blackbird	Snow Bunting