

Scotland Trip – March 2018

After toying with a few ideas of doing things differently this year we quickly dismissed them again in favour of sticking to our usual Scotland trip in March. We were itching to go back and having found an amazing cottage last year there was no debating about where we wanted to stay. We were desperate to book Rymore Wood Lodge again but had to get in early to make sure it didn't get booked up before we had a chance. This meant that Wendy had to secure her dates at work before the end of the year, which is usually totally against the rules. She explained her predicament and luckily they let her put her dates in well before the 2018 calendar went up....Phew! I contacted the owner, managed to get our 2 person discount again and paid the deposit before the end of the year! How organized is that? The weather up in Scotland was looking a bit grim when the temperature plummeted and a weather front, titled 'The Beast from the East' struck and covered the UK in a thick layer of snow. This caused all kinds of travel disruptions and treacherous road conditions, which meant that yet again we had a huge spanner thrown into the works of our holiday. Would the boat go? Would we be able to get up there? With just a week to go only time would tell but hopefully the never-ending saga of the new roof would surely be over by the time we got back. Wouldn't it?

Friday 9th March

As usual I worked through my lunch to get out early while Wendy had to stay until the hygienist had finished. Luckily she was running on time and was finished by 5.15pm, so Wendy shut up shop as quickly as possible and I picked her up to save her some time. We were ready nice and early, so headed off to the Sea Terminal in good time and luckily it wasn't windy at all. When we arrived at 6.55pm we noticed that it was unusually busy and there were a few campervans with dog motifs on the sides waiting to board, so we wondered if they were heading to Crufts. We heard **Herring Gulls** but it was far too dark to see anything else. We boarded at 7.18pm and were put downstairs on the main deck right by the entrance, so we'd be one of the first cars off, which would speed our eta at the Travelodge up even more. Happy days :). By then Lyca was very excited and being very vocal, in the back seat so I had to tussle with her to hook her onto her lead! She pulled me all the way up the stairs with her tail wagging until we got to the passenger lounge. There was a huge Giant Poodle at the desk, so we hung back until it'd gone but Lyca couldn't contain herself any longer and was up on her back legs dancing. Such an attention seeker :P. After the coast was clear we got our key and Lyca lead the way up to the cabin where she jumped on the bed and curled up. She looked very cute, so Wendy got her camera out to take a photo but Lyca seemed to know and got up and turned around!



Camera shy

The captain came on and made his announcement and we were confused when he said there was a force 5-6 because it wasn't windy at all. Eh? Our hearts then sank when he told us that due to a lower than normal tide we wouldn't be able to dock at Heysham until 12am...about 30mins late! Boooooo. All our hopes of getting up to the Travelodge early went out of the window and now it'd be later than ever! We departed Douglas at 7.37pm and waited with baited breath to see if it was going to be rough. As we headed out into the bay we were expecting some kind of motion but weirdly there wasn't any, not that either of us were complaining. After Wendy had painted her nails blue she got up and rang the buzzer for room service. When my chicken burger came I was very impressed that there was no salad or coleslaw but Wendy wasn't so happy as she usually eats that with some chips.....Hahaha! There were more chips than usual though so we both started to tuck in. Wendy rooted through the condiments and was gutted to find that there was no salt, pepper or vinegar either, which was a bit weird. "You can't eat chips without salt and pepper!" she exclaimed and then applied a liberal dousing of tomato sauce in the hope that it'd do the trick but it didn't. It didn't bother me and I enjoyed it as much as ever, which was handy seeing as it was my tea after all. After I'd put the tray out in the corridor we settled down to watch some TV. I was wide awake and as usual Wendy dozed off and at 11pm I took Lyca out to the deck to see if she wanted a wee. It was raining and foggy outside, so I couldn't see anything southwards, but it didn't feel too cold. Usually we'd be looking forward to docking by then, but we still had an hour to go so it felt like a very long journey.

Saturday 10th March

Finally the announcement came for us to go and being right next to the entrance we were driving off at 12.04am....Phew! Now all I had to do was get us up to Dumfries, so we could get some sleep before the long day ahead. We past the "Welcome to Scotland" sign at 1.19am and 5minutes later we were seeing snow lying on the verges. We were very glad to arrive at the Travelodge at 1.40am and we raced up to the room, gave Lyca a drink, got changed and did our teeth. Wendy was complaining that it was cold, but I didn't think it was and went out like a light. Wendy was so cold she couldn't get to sleep and then woke up twice freezing. Next up was Lyca batting her in the face to get her up and a kid jumping

up and down in the room above us, so she hadn't slept very well at all when I woke up with the alarm going off at 8.30am. We could hear **Rooks** and peering out through the curtains we could see that they were very busy building their nests in the trees outside the room.



Room with a view

It was throwing it down when I took Lyca out for a wee, but it felt quite warm to me, so I didn't know what to wear. While I was doing that Wendy was getting Lyca's breakfast ready and refreshing her water bowl. Back in the room Lyca wolfed it down, so we crossed our fingers that she didn't puke up like last time and luckily she didn't....Phew! Rooting through the small suitcase I realized that I hadn't packed my waterproof trousers and ski pants to change in to, so as it was forecast to rain all day I had to go down to the car to dig them out of the big case....Urrghhh! Wendy had packed hers, so she was sorted and after she'd got dressed she went over to Starbucks to get a cappuccino. These days she steers well clear of the omnipresent coffee chains, but she made an exception seeing as she didn't have half an hour to wait for the room's tiny kettle to boil but mainly to avoid drinking insipid instant Nescafe with UHT milk (such a coffee snob!). We ate a cereal bar to tide us over and while we were getting sorted for the day ahead we added **Chaffinch, Robin, Wren, Dunnock, Blackbird** and **Great Tit** to our list. With the weather being so bad Wendy didn't feel particularly enthusiastic whereas I was really excited and wanted to get going as soon as possible. She was getting ready at the pace of a heavily sedated snail, so to save some time I zoomed off to the petrol station to fill my car up, so I could get us up to the cottage without having to find somewhere en route. When I got back she was just about ready and while we had a final look out of the widow we noticed **Jackdaws** up in the trees with the Rooks. We left the room at 9.43am and Wendy instantly noticed that it was freezing and not at all mild like I'd said it was earlier.....Ooops!

By the time I set off it was 9.48am and it was still raining, which wasn't the best start to the first day of our holiday. We were surprised and a bit disappointed at the lack of snow considering how bad it'd been just a week before. We were still unsure as to how bad it was going to be further north and kept our fingers crossed that we could get to the cottage. There were **Woodpigeons, Herring Gulls** and **Carrion Crows** in the fields but the only snow that was left was up

against the stone walls where it had probably drifted and not had a chance to thaw yet. When we got to Cricketford we found some **Greylags** and on a small loch there were some **Tufted Ducks** and a **Mute Swan**. Next up was a **Common Buzzard**, which with all my camera gear still in the boot was teasing me by sitting on a fence post right at the side of the road. Typical! We spotted a huge flock of **Whooper Swans** in a field as we arrived at Castle Douglas as well as a naff looking travelling circus in a car park. Surely nobody in their right mind goes there for a day out in freezing cold March? The Cockerpoo invasion was already evident and we'd seen 2 by the time we got to the entrance to Carlingwark Loch as well as some chirpy **House Sparrows**.

I parked up at 10.17am and we had a scan of the loch from the car because all the reports of our target birds had said, "Viewable from the car park." We could see **Coot, Little Grebe, Goldeneye, Moorhen, Mallard** and **Black-headed Gull** but there was no sign of the Ring-necked Duck or Smew we'd hoped for. We knew it was too good to be true, even though they had been seen regularly for weeks, and eventually we decided that we'd have to put a bit of effort in and go for a wander if we stood any chance. The birds hadn't been reported for a few days though but that didn't necessarily mean that they'd gone and could just have been that nobody had been there recently having already filled their boots. We walked along the side of the loch over to the south end and scanned frantically to try and save ourselves from our first dip of the trip.



Carlingwark Loch

All we could find were **Cormorant, Blue Tit, Oystercatcher**, another Cockerpoo, a pair of **Bullfinches** and a **Great Black-backed Gull**.....Urrghhhh! At 4c it felt really cold just standing around and there were dogs running around everywhere by then, so we were keen to get back to the car as quickly as possible. The birds may have been still there for all we knew but we weren't prepared to walk through the thick mud to get to the hide at the far end just on the off chance, so we gave up.

I turned the heaters up in the car and we left at 10.40am to head to a place we always look forward to visiting to get our breakfast.



Lyca and her toy

Not long after we'd left we saw our first **Red Kite**, but the rain was really heavy by then. As we turned off at the junction we saw a sign we'd never noticed before. It said, "Gatehouse of Fleet – Biosphere Community" and we wondered if it had always been there. Wendy found out when we were back at home that it has just recently been granted Biosphere Community status, which is pretty cool. I parked up in the car park and Wendy rushed off to the Café in Galloway Lodge, while I amended my sat nav to get us up to our HQ quicker by staying on the A roads. There were people milling about with their dogs everywhere but I realized that it was much colder than I'd bargained on, so I was going to need my base layers. Wendy came back with our food and as usual I had a sausage bap and she had a cheese and tomato toastie with a cappuccino.....Om nom nom :). Wendy always says that it's best toastie she's ever had and this time was no exception and it was as good as ever. With local produce that good it's no wonder the town has been given Biosphere status. The Café is understandably always busy but it's well worth the wait and I'm so glad my Mum and Dad told us about it all those years ago. Luckily she still had loads of chutney left from last year, so she didn't come back with a bag full of it to try and squeeze into the already full car this time. We were absolutely stuffed when we left at 11.36am and set off for our traditional visit to Ken-Dee. Wendy noticed that the Deli she'd found in Gatehouse of Fleet last year was now a Café/Bakery called The Scone Kitchen and we wondered how it could survive with Galloway Lodge being so popular. Then again maybe it's possible that it could even be better?

As we drove through Laurieston Wendy spotted a large flock of Thrushes landing in some Hawthorn, so I stopped the car, so we could see what they were. They were all **Redwing** and there wasn't a single Fieldfare amongst them, which surprised us. Having noticed the lack of them in the Isle of Man over the winter we'd have put money on there being some there. We saw 2x **Collard Doves** flying around Laurieston Village but nothing else until we turned down the track to Ken-Dee and saw a **Pheasant**.

It was 12.04pm when we arrived at RSPB Ken-Dee Marshes and it was absolutely throwing it down. Wendy just wanted to get up to the Cairngorms and walk Lyca

somewhere up there but there was no way I was going to turn down our one and only chance of Willow Tit and a nice flat walk! She wasn't happy but Lyca needed a walk to keep her quiet for the long drive ahead of us, so it was tough luck. We set off in the rain with Wendy's face saying it all! It was cold and it was raining but I wanted to make the most of our only walk of the day, which is one I look forward to every time. The path was wet and muddy and our trousers were splattered in it within minutes but Lyca was enjoying all the sniffs and I was enjoying just being there. Wendy dragged along behind us and grunted when I called out, "**Mistle Thrush!**" to add to our list. It was very quiet on the way down and we only found a **Coal Tit** but Lyca found a **Grey Squirrel**, which I wasn't expecting at all. We would expect a Red Squirrel there, but a Grey was a first for us as well as being a very bad sign. I picked up a **Nuthatch** on call, which Wendy was anything but impressed by, but it was going to take something mega to impress her!

When we got to the Hide the feeders outside were a hive of activity. Unfortunately, there were just loads of Coal Tits, Great Tits, **Blue Tits** and Chaffinches and no sign of what we were hoping for.



Loch Ken

We'd decided before we'd set off that we weren't going to bother walking to the furthest hide, as we didn't have time, although we knew we'd be sacrificing our best chance of seeing Willow Tit. On the loch itself there was just a few **Teal** and some **Canada Geese** but more interestingly the people in the hide had seen a Red Squirrel a few minutes ago and a White-fronted Goose from the Goose watch point. They were packing up to leave, so we had the hide to ourselves after they'd gone and I wanted to take the opportunity to get some decent shots. A **Great-spotted Woodpecker** flew in and landed straight on the peanut feeder, so all I had to do was hope that it'd land somewhere else. There were 2 male Woodpeckers, which made all the small birds scarper every time they appeared but neither of them was interested in posing for me and were far too interested in stuffing their faces. The Red Squirrel was nowhere to be seen either and Wendy was getting bored, so I felt pressured to get something quickly, so I rattled some shots off and got an OK Great Tit in the dark. For the first time ever on a wildlife holiday I hadn't brought my big Canon 500mm L IS lens. I'd put all my eggs in my much cheaper and a bit lighter basket, which was my Sigma 150-

600mm sport lens. This lens was much more versatile especially for videoing, so I just hoped I wouldn't be made to pay quality wise for taking this risk.



Great Tit

After reading the reports book it was clear that we didn't stand a chance of getting Willow Tit unless we went to the other hide, but we just couldn't stretch the time out that far and with the weather being so miserable we pulled the plug on it.

On the way back up Wendy spotted a small bird dropping down from the hedge into a field, so I had a look and found a female **Reed Bunting** hopping around in the mud. The only way we were going to be able to see the White-front Goose would involve squelching through the muddiest field we've ever seen, so to save Lyca from getting absolutely filthy I decided to go on my own and gave Wendy the car key. I set off through the mud and slipped and slid my way to the view point where it was pretty miserable, as it's quite exposed.



A had a quick scan but couldn't see anything, so I gave it up as a bad job very quickly and rushed back.

When Wendy got back to the car she had a major job on her hands to try and dry Lyca on the back seat. Her paws and coat were soaked and caked in mud, so the coat had to come off and be hung over the back of the seat to hopefully dry out during the journey. Luckily 70% of Lyca was dry and it was just her head and legs that needed a rub down. Wendy had to take her coat off and hang that on the back of her chair too as well as drying off her bins that were dripping wet and totally steamed up by then. When I got back it was a similar rigmarole except much worse due to all the mud I'd acquired in the field. Urrghhhh, the joys of travelling! Seeing as we didn't plan on any stops it seemed a fitting time to eat a packet of lentil curls before we left. As we sat there we heard a flock of **Long-tailed Tits** as they worked their way through the bushes in the car park. Wendy was starting to get worried that we were cutting a bit fine to make it to HQ in time for our Tesco delivery, so at 2.06pm we set off.

As if it wasn't stressful enough, a few yards up the road some **** came hurtling towards us, ignoring the layby he could easily have pulled into and stopped in front of us! I couldn't believe it when he started gesticulating that he couldn't do anything, but someone had to do something or we'd reach a point of stalemate. Realising that one of us had to act quickly and it wasn't going to be him I had to reverse back up the road and round a blind bend to find a layby so that he could carry on his merry way.....Grrrrrrrr! I beeped my horn and gave him an angry look as he drove past me, which was letting him off rather lightly in my opinion. Finally, we were on our way again and we spotted a Buzzard in a field at the side of the road, which lifted as we approached and flew along next to the car for the next 100yards or so.....Cool. There seemed to be a lot of Buzzards about and a good few Red Kites in the area although my eyes were firmly fixed on the road so as to avoid hitting one of the many potholes! While I negotiated my way around them Wendy saw something out of the corner of her eye in a layby and her eyes nearly popped out of her head when she saw that it was a **Woodcock**. There'd been a bit of an influx recently, but it must've been desperate to be feeding at the side of a road. It was hideously slow going driving through the small villages and we were relieved to see the South Lanarkshire sign at 3.21pm and Wendy commented that we hadn't seen a Starling yet. A few minutes later we spotted some **Starlings** perched in a line on some wires above a farmhouse....Hahaha. There was a **Grey Heron** standing in a field just before we turned off at the junction that finally got us onto the motorway. We'd just driven past the famous phallic shaped plantation on the hill when we spotted a huge flock of **Lapwing**, but when we got to Glasgow the visibility went terrible due to water spray off the road. By 4.02pm we passed the North Lanarkshire sign, which feels like another milestone, but we were still hours away from HQ. This time I had decided to ditch the Perthshire tourist route and Amulree road and stick to the A9 all the way even with the 60mph camera-controlled speed limit the entire length. According to the sat nav this would make it nearly an hour quicker but it would probably be more in reality. A **Magpie** flew over the road and we started to notice that there was a bit more snow still lying around. A **Sparrowhawk** entertained us for a brief moment but we were starting to get pretty bored by 4.46pm and just wanted to get into the cottage and unpack our stuff. It was surprisingly dark already, so all our hopes of being able to see the scenery for the entire journey for a change were shattered. To top it off we got stuck behind a

horsebox for ages, which slowed us down for a while and we saw another Sprawk whizz past. It was 5.22pm when we hit the “Welcome to the Cairngorms” sign and although the mountains were white there was absolutely no snow on the ground but the rain had turned to sleet.

By then Wendy was absolutely bursting for a wee, having not stopped since leaving Ken-Dee and she knew there was nowhere to stop before Aviemore. I suggested she used to loo in Tesco and grabbed a Pizza for our tea while she was in there, which she agreed seemed like a good plan. Some **Red Deer** had come down from the hills to feed at the side of the road where there wasn't so much snow, so we had unusually good views of them. At 5.43pm we were pleased to see the “Welcome to the Highlands” sign and Wendy jiggled around in her seat hoping for no hold ups. It was only 1c and the road turned slushy 26miles away from Aviemore, so we started to wonder if it was going to get any worse. Luckily when the temperature went up to 1.5c the slush cleared and it was plain sailing all the way up to Tesco.....Phew! Wendy bailed out of the car and rushed into the store only to find that it had been refurbished and the WC's had moved....Noooooooooooo! She wandered around trying to find it until she couldn't hold on for much longer, had to ask a member of staff and was pointed in the right direction. She couldn't find the Pizzas either and had a grand tour of the new look Aviemore Tesco before coming to the car armed with some food for our tea.

The Italian pizza place was heaving, as were all the other food outlets and there were people milling around everywhere. It was probably the busiest we'd ever seen it, so it must've been having an exceptionally good ski season. We didn't hang about and set off again without using sat nav seeing as I thought it'd be easy enough to re-find the cottage. Driving through Boat of Garten we noticed that the new housing development was nearly finished and that a huge section of the Red Squirrel Woods had been removed!! ☹️ We'd seen the planning application for the site last year and weren't very impressed with the idea, so to see it already nearly finished was quite depressing. I found the little back road that lead to the cottage but in the darkness we both started to wonder where it was and whether we'd already gone too far. All of a sudden Wendy said, “What's that in the road?” and in my headlights I could see a shape sitting in the middle of the road. As we got closer it didn't move and we were stunned to see a lovely but rather wet **Tawny Owl** sitting there.



Dashcam grab

I stopped the car before I ran it over and got out to try and flush it before somebody else did but it didn't seem bothered, so we started to get worried. I got so close to it before it finally flew up and landed on the branch of a tree but we were still worried as to why it seemed so lethargic. All we can think was that it had suffered with all the recent snow, so we crossed our fingers that it'd make up for lost time now it'd thawed and build its reserves back up again soon. There was nothing we could do apart from leave it to its own devices, so we wished it luck and drove off. Next, we came across a **Brown Hare** in the road, which didn't stick around when it saw us coming.

Finally after a long day we spotted the sign for Rymore Wood Lodge and I turned off, drove up the track and parked up outside at 6.48pm. We were so pleased to be there but there was one more hurdle to negotiate before we could start unloading the car. I dug out the information sheet I'd been sent and read the instructions for the new key code system. This was great because it meant that we didn't have to carry a key around with us and didn't have to worry about losing it either. It was all a bit complicated at such a late stage in the day and if Wendy was the only one there then I'm sure she'd never have got inside...Hahahah! When I opened the door and we went in Wendy was pleased to be greeted by a blast of warm air. Last year the owner thought we were arriving on the Friday and had put the heating on for us, so it was freezing when we'd arrived on the Saturday. Lyca ran in and went straight to the living room for a roll around on the rug, and then into the kitchen looking for her tea as though she was at home. She even had her paws up at the sink licking her lips in anticipation of the water Wendy was going to put down for her. While Wendy sorted that out I started the 57 trips backwards and forwards to the car to bring all our stuff in. Wendy put the oven on and while it heated up she went around closing the millions of curtains that hung all around the place and unpacked our stuff. As a welcome pack there was fresh flowers and a packet of Walker's Shortbread on the table and in the fridge were 2 pints of semi-skimmed milk and a bottle of Prosecco, so Wendy's face lit up.

We'd been worried that the house wouldn't live up to our expectations, but it was exactly as we'd left it a year ago and the standards hadn't fallen at all. Apart from the glasses in the cupboard needing a wash everything else was spot on and we sat down to eat our tea feeling very content. The pizza was very nice and just what we fancied and after that Wendy went off for a bath. I decided to check the feeders outside and was horrified to find that they were all completely empty :O! If nobody had been feeding the birds recently this could be a total disaster for us, as we know from past experience that it could take days before they'd come back and the chance of getting any mammals looked slim. I was fuming and started to get flashbacks of the disappointment we'd had during our 2nd stay at Ord Cottage at Nethybridge, but all I could do was fill them up and hope for the best. There wasn't much in the way of food either, so that was our first plan for tomorrow sorted. I then noticed some headlights and saw that it was Tesco, so I stopped what I was doing and ran around to make sure they found us. I needn't have worried as they found the house no problem at all. I brought it all in and went back outside to resume filling the feeders. After I'd used up the last of it I threw some peanuts on the ground and placed an egg on the bird table with no confidence that they'd be gone in the morning.

I'd brought mine and my Dads trail cameras with me, so I rigged them both up too and went back inside to have a moan to Wendy. In the hallway I found that

the owner had installed a Hive, which made altering the heating an absolute breeze and made me want one myself. There were also motion sensors in all the rooms, which added to the smart door system made the house very high tech indeed. Bearing this in mind I thought I'd check the internet speed and was totally unimpressed to find that it was 0.6mb down and 0.1mb up, which was rubbish, almost Wales like! Wendy opened the bottle of Prosecco and then sat down to speak to her Mum, which was when we both started to realize how tired we were. She couldn't think of words and struggled to remember what we'd done during the day.....Hahahahaha! After that she reluctantly dragged herself off to go and dry her hair, which she thought was the last chore she'd have to do. After that she spotted the electric blanket, so had to strip the bed and fit that before bedtime. She ended up having to get me to help, which was the last thing I felt like doing after everything else! I was a bit grumpy by then but Wendy was adamant that I'd appreciate it later and it was the last of our jobs done. Even Lyca seemed really tired as we sat watching some rubbish that was on TV and Wendy noticed a huge water stain on the ceiling where there'd obviously been some kind of leak upstairs.....Oops! While Wendy prattled away about wanting to see lochs like mirrors I was engrossed in looking for a new TV as well as robotic lawnmowers, which annoyed her big time. Lyca took herself off to bed, so Wendy put the electric blanket on ready for bedtime. At 10.30pm we couldn't stay awake any longer and after I'd taken Lyca out for a wee I got into bed and had to admit that fitting the electric blanket had been worth the effort after all.

Sunday 11th March

Lyca saw fit to wake me up at 7.10am, so I took her out into the garden while Wendy stayed in bed. I brought the cameras in but the egg was still where I'd put it last night, so I knew straight away that we hadn't been visited by a Pine Marten :(The peanuts had all gone from the ground though, so something had come in at least. After she'd eaten her breakfast Lyca went back to bed until Wendy got up at 7.36am and joined me in the kitchen to see what we had coming to the feeders. Looking at the camera footage we'd had a **Badger** and a **Woodmouse**, which we can't sniff at but wasn't the Holy Grail we'd hoped for.



Hello

Before long I shrieked, "**Red Squirrel**" and Wendy came rushing over to the window for a look. That was a brilliant start, so I needn't have worried but now all we needed was a Crestie to make our first morning complete, that was probably pushing it a bit though. I had my breakfast and having decided on a

chilled out start to the day I sat back to watch the feeders while Wendy knocked up some soup while she had the chance.



My favourite spot

The feeding station was certainly pulling the birds in despite having been empty when we arrived and there were birds everywhere. We had Goldfinch, Coal Tits, Great Tits, Blue Tits, Chaffinches and Blackbirds all stuffing their faces, which was really good to see. All of sudden I spotted something high up in a Pine tree that caught my eye and I saw that it was a **Brambling**. I told Wendy and realized that if I hadn't been being lazy and lying back in the chair I wouldn't have seen it at all. It came down into some of the lower branches but didn't go near the feeders, which surprised us. While Wendy watched it out of the small window by the sink she noticed a **Crested Tit** flying in and squealed in excitement. Yes! It grabbed a nut and flew off with it, so it was a brief visit but at least we had our 2 most wanted things at the feeders :). The Brambling cleared off and was never seen again but we ended up with 2x Red Squirrels that along with 2x Cresties could've kept us happy for the rest of the day.



Video grab

I spotted a **Treecreeper**, a Great-spotted Woodpecker and some **Siskin** also came to the feeders, so we really needed to get out and buy some more food before they ran out. We also needed some window cleaner because yet again the windows were anything but clean and I needed to get some photos.

We headed off to the shop at Boat of Garten at 11.36am. At Loch Garten it looked very impressive fully iced over.



Loch Garten

At Boat of Garten I picked up some square sausage for my tea, but they didn't have much in the way of bird food, so we headed to The Heather Centre. We wondered if it'd been rebuilt after the fire yet but as we pulled into the car park all that was there was the metal framework.



It's a start

Wendy got out and headed over to the makeshift shed shops and I followed behind her. Unbeknown to me the ground was icy, so I got a nasty shock and nearly went flying.....Eek! There was nobody at the counter in the shop when

we spotted a sack of sunflower hearts with no price on it, so Wendy wandered over to the shed café to see if she could get some help there. The woman behind the counter told her to bring it all in there but Wendy explained that one of the bags was far too big to carry, so she said she'd sort it. In the meantime a lad had come in to put prices on the sacks and serve us, so the café lady looked a bit annoyed....Ooops! When I saw the price was 49.99 for 20kg, I had to stifle a laugh, I mean £50 when its £25 on amazon, so even though I desperately needed sunflower hearts I wasn't going to be ripped off. We bought some other bits instead and with our bird food we headed back to HQ seeing 2x Lapwing in the field just after Dipper Bridge.

It was a balmy 6c, which was much warmer than we'd expected it to be up there but then again it could all change at the drop of a hat. A very lucky Red Squirrel ran out into the road in front of an approaching car and it would've been a gonner if the driver of the other car hadn't had to stop to let me go past. Wendy made me stop so she could take a photo when we went past Loch Garten and had one of her, "Stop the clock" moments.



Loch Garten

Having thought I'd be able to get us back to the cottage no problem all of sudden the road didn't seem to be right. "Errrrrrr?" Wendy casually informed me that we needed the Tulloch road, which nearly caused me to keel over in shock! Wendy's sense of direction is atrocious, so I didn't believe her but after doing a complete loop back to Nethybridge I started to wonder if she was right. I resorted to my sat nav and it was saying we were 7minutes away, which having been just around the corner a few minutes ago was a bit frustrating. This time I took the Tulloch road and Wendy had been right.....for once :P.

Due to this unexpected diversion we weren't back at HQ until 12.59pm, which was bang on lunchtime and while Wendy made our sarnies I went out and loaded up the feeding station. Within a few minutes we had Long-tailed Tits on the fat balls, the Cresties were back and new for the garden was a Woodpigeon. Having already decided not to venture very far and to do our local walk I looked into how I could mix it up a bit to add a bit of interest. I planned a nice loop walk that incorporated Forest Lodge into it and was longer than the one we'd done last year.

It was 2.05pm when we were finally leaving and as soon as I stepped outside I heard **Crossbills** flying over. We walked up the road and past Tore Hill Cottage noticing that there was nobody staying there, the feeders were all empty and there were no birds in the garden at all. There was an old forester's cottage opposite that I reckon I might be able to afford, not to sure how many mod cons it would have though...



Dream on

By the time we were heading towards the house on the Forest Lodge track I realized that we'd missed our turning and gone too far....Doh!



Forest Lodge track

While I checked the map on my phone Wendy wandered back up the track with Lyca who was very busy 'Voling'.....Hahahaha! This is when she sniffs a Vole and sticks her head right into the tufts of grass to try and get it. She doesn't come up for air for ages and it seems to be one of the things she enjoys the most when she's on holiday. I worked out that we had indeed gone too far and got us back

on track and heading into the Woods even though it didn't look like there was a path there at all.



Really?

It wasn't long before we noticed that there was loads of felled trees across the path and Wendy started to wonder if we should've been in there at all. It looked fine on my map, so I assured her it was OK and carried on clambering over the fallen trunks as we went.



Assault course

My only thought was maybe they did this to stop vans using the track as we've seen vans on the tracks further up in the woods before. It was a cracking walk though and we came across some stunning looking pools. I could only imagine what Dragonflies would be there in the summer, if the pools didn't dry out that is.



Dragonfly pool

Our next hurdle was a stream that we all had to jump over, which was easy peasy for Lyca and I but a bit of a stretch for Wendy's stumpy little legs...Hahahaha!



Jump

We then found ourselves in an area of dense woodland and weaved our way through the trees not really knowing where we were going. All of a sudden a bird flew up from the ground close to our left and we both stood there speechless until our brains kicked in and we looked at each other in disbelief and said, "**Capercaillie!**" It was a female, which seems to be all we ever see these days but it was a Caper nevertheless, so we were pretty chuffed. After our excitement had died down I said, "Ah well, we can go home now!" and we laughed, as we'd now seen virtually all the 'biggies' that we wanted. The only other thing was Ptarmigan but that wasn't a given and totally dependent on whether we could walk far enough up Cairngorm to find one. It was so quiet you could've heard a pin drop and without a breath of wind it was totally still and peaceful. Wendy started "momenting", so I hurried her along negotiating the assault course of trees and more water as we went. We heard our first **Goldcrest** of the trip and Wendy found loads of poo, which looked very much like Pine Marten poo. While she was tracking various piles of poo I stopped to look up the trees and was completely taken aback when a second female Caper came flying out! It was only half way up and right next to the track too, which made us even more confused as to where we should be looking to find them roosting. We couldn't believe that we'd seen 2x Capers on our 1st day. Happy

days :). Our elation was short lived though, when we found ourselves facing our biggest obstacle of the walk, a stream too wide to jump across. We were so close to home that if we turned back we'd be doing the majority of walk again and it was starting to get dark, so we couldn't afford to do that. Uh oh! I reckoned I could paddle across while giving Wendy a piggy back, but she wasn't having any of that, besides what would we do with Lyca? I suggested tying her to a tree until I could go back for her, but Wendy still wasn't sold. We walked up and down to see if there was anywhere to jump it, but it was just too far and it was too deep for us to paddle across too, so we didn't know what to do. I wandered off downstream while Wendy stood looking at the stones in front of her trying to work out if she could use them. There were 2 branches either side of her, which she grabbed hold of and stepped out onto the first stone with her left foot. One down, two more to go, but so far so good. Still holding onto the branches she swung her right foot onto the second stone, which duly started to wobble, so she quickly swung it back. This needed thinking about, but her legs had now turned to jelly after the wobble, but it was too late to go back and she went in for a second attempt. This time she took the wobble and launched her left leg over onto the last stone before she let go of the branches and jumped across onto the bank....Phew! She was now on the other side but Lyca and I were still stranded. Having watched her doing her Indiana Jones impression I headed back up to try and work out how to get Lyca over. Even though it was pretty deep and fast flowing we reckoned that we could get her to wade across, so Wendy coaxed her over to the other side while I was left still holding her flexi-lead. I suggested throwing it over but Wendy had other ideas and scanned around until she found a fallen branch that was long enough to reach across, so I could hook it onto it. Clever! This worked a treat and although we now had a soaking wet dog all that remained was for me to get across with my camera without dropping it or falling in myself. Wendy showed me which stones she'd used and warned me about the wobbly one, so I grabbed hold of the branches and made my way across safely....Phew! After our mini adventure we needed to get back, so we decided against going through Tore Hill Wood because we'd already seen everything that would be possible in there anyway, so there didn't seem much point. There was loads more possible Pine Marten poo all the way back until we eventually came out on the road again.

We were back at HQ at 5pm and we were knackered but then again our small local walk had actually been 6.5miles. Hahaha.....whoops!



HQ

Wendy gave Lyca her tea, which was gone in no time and set about making ours. She grimaced as she cooked up all 4 slices of square sausage and commented at the hideous amount of fat that came out of it. She then gave me all the details as to how tough it was to cut but if she was trying to put me off it she was wasting her breath.....:)! After my gourmet tea I started to clean the windows while Wendy went for a bath. I put the 2 cameras out again and added another egg to the set up, this time on top of the vertical post. I was then ordered to go for a bath too, which I reluctantly did and then we all watched some TV. Lyca was very tired after her exciting and challenging walk and by 10.58pm we went off to bed.

Monday 12th March

It was 7.30am when we woke up and as usual the first thing we did was look through the curtain to see if the eggs had gone. Disappointingly they were both still there, so we knew that yet again there'd been no Pine Marten :(I did however catch a glance of something dark disappearing into the woods when I opened the curtains, which I had no idea what it was. After I'd been out with Lyca I checked the cameras and the Badger had been and munched its way through all the peanuts again. That was more than likely what I'd seen disappearing into the woods too. The feeding station kept us amused again and a Carrion Crow came in but, surprisingly didn't touch the eggs. The 2x Red Squirrels were back as well as the Cresties and 2x **Jays** paid us a visit. Lyca was sitting bolt upright in her chair next to me and was watching all the comings and goings whilst I took video through the now crystal clear windows.



Video grab

My guts weren't feeling the best and Wendy was as unsympathetic as ever because she was convinced it was due to me having eaten such an unhealthy tea the night before.....Urrghhhh!

We finally headed out at 10.27am with our first stop of the day being the Chemist in Grantown-on-Spey. I was certain it wasn't IBS and just indigestion, so Wendy went in and came back with the only thing she could find, some overpriced individual Gaviscon liquid sachets. They were handy though with us being out and about, so I got one in me as soon as possible and then filled my car up at the petrol station. There was land for sale for development at Dulnain Bridge and one thing we'd noticed from previous years was the amount of new developments that were popping up everywhere. Grantown was obviously no exception to add to those we'd already seen in Boat-of-Garten, Nethybridge and Aviemore! Aviemore has even got a huge new retail park under construction right on the main road, which no doubt will be up and running and like part of the furniture next time we're up there. We stopped in Carrbridge so that Wendy could nip to the WC's while she had the chance and driving past the river we spotted a **Dipper** sitting on a rock. Hopefully we wouldn't struggle for them this year having found a brilliant new site last year. On the way out of Carrbridge we saw a **Song Thrush** and at the turn off at Findhorn Bridge we saw our first **Red Grouse**.

There were some Red Deer at the side of the road and driving along the endless road through the valley some **Redpoll** were up in the trees. Wendy spotted a large raptor high up in the sky, so I pulled over and we had a look. It was so far away and having nothing to compare its size with it was difficult to say but we settled on Buzzard. There were a couple of **Wild Goats** with their huge horns and shaggy coats grazing in the fields down by the river, which was still frozen over. Wendy spotted another bird, miles away, which was a really tricky one but we had to dismiss it as another Buzzard, although I wasn't convinced. The first car park was full, so I hoped that there was going to be a space for us in the one further up. When we got to the Findhorn Valley car park we were the only car there, so we had the place to ourselves. It was already 12.04pm, so we ate our lunch before we went out because we didn't know how long we were going to be.



Brrrrrr!

After a quick lunch we set off at 12.25pm and we hadn't got very far when we spotted a really pale Buzzard that looked very much like a Rough-legged. Although it was just a Common Buzzard it always makes us wonder if these very pale birds are some of the ones reported in Norfolk as being rough-legged. There were loads of Red Deer up on the far hills, which were easy to spot against the thick covering of white snow.

Lyca was having a great time Voling and Wendy stopped to get some video of her doing it.



Voling

As we wandered up the road we heard the familiar sound of a **Raven** flying over, so we looked up to see where it was. Luckily, I looked down again just in time to see a **Vole** running across the path that Lyca must've flushed out with her snout. I called it to Wendy, who also saw it but strangely Lyca didn't seem interested at all. Every time we spotted a raptor it turned out to be another Buzzard, which was starting to get very frustrating. All we wanted was to see a Golden Eagle and then we could turn back but having said that we were quite enjoying the walk for

a change. Despite all the snow and the frozen river, it was the warmest and least windy that we'd ever felt it there. Even in summer there's a really bitter wind blowing through the valley and we're usually freezing but today Wendy had even taken her gloves off :O! As it was so pleasant we decided to go further than we normally would to see what was around the corner. I'd always imagined a house somewhere due to there always being a 4x4 or two driving down the road. We heard a call, which I couldn't place but Wendy chirped up with, "**Kestrel**" and reminded me of the time we'd come across a very vocal nesting pair at Lower Gorple Reservoir. We spotted a group of 4 raptors circling over a hill, so we thought we'd go and check them out stopping to admire the frozen, snow covered river as we went.



The river

A **Peregrine** zoomed overhead but as far as we could see the 4 birds we'd been heading towards had already gone.....Damn! Just as we thought we'd lost them 4x Buzzards appeared, so our hearts sank again and the hunt for a Goldie continued. We started to wonder whether the disgusting Scottish Mountain Hare cull had affected the Eagle population in the valley and more to the point whether that had been the ulterior motive all along as Mountain hare is a huge part of a Golden Eagles diet? The scenery in the area was really impressive so even without Eagles it was well worth being there.



Nice

At the end of the road we could see 3 small houses and further along a huge mansion came into view, so we finally knew what was down there after all these years. There was a bloke standing outside the mansion and all we could hear was the calls of Buzzards echoing through the valley, so it must be an amazing place to live.



Possibly a bit too remote?

We decided to turn around at that point and on the way back we watched a herd of Deer walking in a line across the mountains. It looked pretty cool, so I got my camera set up and started to try and get some video.



Video grab

Back at the kennels there was a rather territorial black Labrador standing on guard outside. There was no sign of the owner and it looked quite aggressive with its heckles up, so Lyca wasn't very happy and when it started running towards us barking I had to resort to giving Wendy my bins and tripod to hold and picking her up until it'd gone.....Grrrrr! The poor dog was only being friendly and wanted to play with Lyca but she's got a thing about big black dogs and wasn't having any of it. Luckily it ran back to the house when it realized that Lyca didn't want to play but threatened to come back until we were far enough away to leave us alone.

We were back at the car by 2.55pm having done 12,000 steps, which equated to around 6 miles. The black Lab wasn't letting us off the hook that easily and came running over to the car again, so we were relieved that Lyca was already safely inside before she got herself into trouble. The owners are a bit stupid letting it run around freely though, as not everyone is happy with that kind of behaviour, especially Lyca. As we drove back down the valley a **Mountain Hare** ran across the road in front of us, so we were glad to see that there was at least one that had escaped the Gamekeepers guns. Two **Red-legged Partridges** ran across the road next and there were 6 more in a field further along. There were also 2 massive new houses going up, which must be worth a few bob and an area of woods had been cleared. We wondered if the energy plant plan that had caused such controversy in the area had been passed, as the protest signs had all gone. It had started spitting by then and I suddenly stopped the car to look at a bird that turned out to be just a Woodpigeon. Wendy found it highly amusing, but she soon stopped laughing when I spotted a **Merlin** perching on a telegraph pole. Ha! Driving through Carrbridge there was another Woodcock standing on the pavement at the side of the road.

It was 3.50pm when we arrived at Lochindorb and I really wanted to get some video of some Red Grouse, which I presumed wasn't too much to ask for there. It was raining and pretty dark by then, so not the ideal conditions for shooting any video or photograph, but I remained hopeful that it might brighten up. As we kept our eyes peeled for Grouse I noticed a white Mountain Hare hunkering down in the heather, so I stopped the car. After watching it for a while I realized that I should really be doing something more constructive and grabbed my

camera from the back. Before I could say, "Cheese" a couple of boy racer types came blasting down the road in a noisy car making the Hare scarper.....Nooooooooo! There were 4 others but they were too far away to be worth the effort, so I gave up. Being on a Grouse Moor I started to wonder if they'd been released to shoot but after thinking about it in a less angry way it seemed more likely that they'd come down from the hills to feed where there was less snow. Whatever the reason, they needed to watch their backs! The loch was completely frozen over still, so there wasn't much point looking for anything on it.



Lochindorb

As I drove around the loch there were signs warning people that the nesting Black-throated Divers can get very close to the road! We had to laugh because we've never been remotely close to them and they're usually just a tiny spec on the far side of the loch. There seemed to be a total lack of Red Grouse on the moor and it was getting late, so I'd resigned myself to the fact that I wasn't getting any video this time. I started to head off to go home when I finally spotted 2x Red Grouse at the side of the road. They were really close, so I slowly ground to a halt in the road and poked my camera out of the window. Typically, they hunkered right down with their backs to me, so I gave up. I pulled up in a layby to let Wendy take a photo and while she did that I noticed another Grouse right next to the car, which again wasn't playing ball. I ditched the idea off completely and we left at 4.21pm but I was soon stopped in my tracks when I saw another one standing out in the clear. This was probably the last and best opportunity I was going to get, so I grabbed it. Initially my camera refused to focus on the bird, which had me pulling what little hair I have out, so to speak :P. Eventually I sorted it out and the bird performed OK, although not great, but at least I got one photo!



Red Grouse

When I was happy enough we left and headed back to Grantown so that Wendy could nip into the Co-op to get me some pasta for tea, seeing as Tesco had failed to deliver it in our order. It was absolutely throwing it down by then, so we'd been so lucky to manage to dodge it all day. I stopped at Nethybridge Spa and Wendy ran in to try and get some birdseed for tomorrow, but they didn't have any.

We were back at HQ by 5.17pm and Lyca ran straight into the kitchen looking for her dinner and licking her lips. Unfortunately for her she had a wait while Wendy cooked some broccoli first, which didn't go down very well. After she'd gobbled it up and run off with her dentastick Wendy started making ours. We had our tea and Wendy went for a bath but came back complaining that the hot water had run out while she was filling it, so it wasn't hot enough to boil a lobster in (her usual standard temp!). Luckily since there was a Hive in the house, it took me about 1 second to work out how to boost the hot water and within 30 minutes Wendy was happily boiling herself in the bath :P. It was a chilly evening even in the house, so Wendy opened the brand-new hot water bottle she'd spotted in the wardrobe for a bit of extra warmth. She did suggest that I lit the fire, but I tried to put her off by saying I was paranoid about having a chimney fire, which wound her up because she reckoned the owner would be onto that kind of thing. The truth of the matter was that I just couldn't be arsed with the hassle...especially the cleaning up after Haha! Lyca was flat out all evening and seemed to be having a lot of very eventful dreams, so we reckoned she was Voling :P. She wasn't the only one who was tired and we only made it to 10pm before we headed off to bed.

Tuesday 13th March

After all the sleep she'd had the night before Lyca was awake and raring to get up at 6.45am....Urrghhhhh! This was the day that I'd pinned all my hopes into going up Cairngorm for Ptarmigan, as it had the best forecast of the week. It was set to get windy from tomorrow onwards, so it was now or never and probably good that we were up early. Wendy cracked on and made our sarnies and then had

breakfast, while keeping an eye on the 2x Squirrels that had made themselves permanent fixtures.



Red Squirrel

The Cresties obviously had other ideas and were nowhere to be seen but all the extra food had enticed LTT and GSW in to feed. We were ready to go nice and early and headed out at 8.54am with our first stop being Boat of Garten to get a pan au chocolat and some birdseed that we'd failed to get elsewhere. It was only 2c, so we were fully expecting our walk to be a rather cold one and we were glad we'd put some extra warm gear on. We'd gone for our snow boots, thickest fleeces and Wendy even had her buff round her neck to pull up and cover her face. Driving up towards the car park the snow at the side of the road was pretty deep but the road was totally clear. The snow plough had done a good job of slicing straight through it and Wendy said it looked like the sides of a Christmas cake. At one point it came so far out into the road that it crept into my lane and I had to drive on the other side.

I parked up in Cairngorm car park at 9.35am and looking around the snow was the deepest we'd ever seen it. It looked busy too, so I was glad we'd got there early, as the car park was filling up fast. Wendy went off to the WC's before we set off and while I was getting ready a **Snow Bunting** flew down and landed on a mound in front of the car. A second bird joined it and I was armed with the birdseed this time, so I quickly threw some down to try and coax them in, so I could hopefully get some photos when we got back. When Wendy came back she grabbed her rucksack, took all the stuff we didn't need out of it, so it was lighter and handed it to me. I took my GH5, lens and tripod for video and put my 7D in the camera rucksack just in case and we set off. We'd only got ½ way down the steps when it became apparent that we were going to need our Yak Trax from then on.



Struggling with the Yak Trax

We both stopped to put them on and trying to stretch the rubber bungee type contraptions over your boots is no easy feat, so we were both completely knackered by the time we'd finished and we hadn't even walked anywhere yet! As we started to trudge through the snow Wendy was absolutely blown away as to how good they were and said it was like walking without snow. This was her 1st time using them and she was well impressed. The ski slopes were already a hive of activity, but I hurried ahead so the Wendy didn't waste more time watching (albeit not shown in this photo).



It was busy....honest!

It was hard work going uphill even with the Yak Trax on and not even that cold, so Wendy had to take her Buff off and unzip her coat! We had to stop to let a bloke go past us due to our slow pace and heard Snow Bunts flying over. There was no path at all as it was completely covered in snow, so we just had to follow the foot prints and head in the general direction that we thought was right.



Is this the path?

Further up but not quite at the Ptarmigan hotspot we stopped for a breather (we're getting too old for this now!). While we were standing there Wendy had a scan around and picked out a white shape up against a rock that looked exactly like a Ptarmigan. She got me onto it, but it was so far away we couldn't tell if it was one or not. It looked too good to be true but the only thing wrong with it was the fact that it wasn't moving at all, so needing to be certain I suggested that I went to investigate. I handed Lyca over to Wendy and told her to stay where she was and set off into the snow.



Exploring

As I got closer it started to become obvious that it wasn't a Ptarmigan at all and just a bit of snow doing a good impression of one.....Bah! Luckily my efforts hadn't been a total waste of time and I spotted a Mountain Hare on the further mound, so I started to set up my camera. By the time I'd done that the Hare had cleared off, so I had to pack it all up again....Doh! I decided to go back round the little mound to try and avoid scaring the Mountain Hare but I obviously hadn't realised that the snow had drifted up against it. Instantly, my leg disappeared

into the snow, right up to my thigh and I tumbled over, skilfully rolling onto my back to keep my camera gear dry. I turned around and saw a group of Mountain walkers about 100 yards away absolutely killing themselves laughing..... bugger. I got up and tried to be cleverer about where I put my foot, but BAM over I went again.....Urrghhhh! A few expletives later I pulled myself out of the snow again and crawled on my hands and knees instead until I found some slightly harder snow. By now I was completely exhausted but finally got to a position where I could at least get some Mountain Hare video and some shots!



Mountain Hare

Exhausted, I moved off and on the other side of the mound I went down into another drift.....Aarrghhhh! I was now soaked as well, just to make matters even worse. While I crawled out I heard a call that sounded different from the Red Grouse that I'd been hearing. I double checked on my Collins app on my phone and sure enough it was a **Ptarmigan**Yes! I scanned around but couldn't work out where it was coming from so had to give up. I slowly headed back up the hill to try and find Wendy. While I was engrossed in that I was oblivious to the fact that Wendy couldn't see me and Lyca was whinging and pulling to get to me. It had started to snow lightly and Wendy was getting cold and bored just standing there, so with Lyca being a pain too she wasn't having much fun. Eventually she managed to calm her down and she sat looking and waiting for me to get back.



Watch Dog

To break up the boredom a flock of 50 noisy **Pink-footed Geese** flew overhead, which were the first we'd seen. Eventually I popped up and told Wendy to come up because I'd left my camera stuff further up the path thinking we were going to continue on to the Ptarmigan area. Suddenly, the clear blue sky vanished and low thick cloud had descended on us within seconds. We couldn't see further than the end of our noses and the cracking view had completely vanished.....Uh oh!



Hmmmmmm

This wasn't what we needed and Wendy told me that while I'd been gone she'd been keeping a close eye on the mountain to see if any of the walkers higher up on the path, where we intended to go, were flushing any Ptarmigan but they hadn't. Bearing that in mind in addition to the fact that the snow was getting much deeper and visibility was so poor we decided that there wasn't much point going any further and that we should head back. I had to go back to get my camera though, so I took Lyca with me this time and disappeared into the clouds.



Copping out

This was a shame because I love seeing Ptarmigan and had really wanted to get some video footage of them. Hearing one, miles away just didn't cut the mustard, so my only hope now is that I get better luck next year and still have the knees to carry all the gear up there! On the way down it was a bit slippery but the Yak Trax did a great job, although Wendy did fall over.....Hahaha! We heard a **Pied Wagtail** flying over but I'd started to feel really rough and had to stop a couple of times because I got dizzy and shaky and thought I was going to puke :\. Wendy commented that it was a good job we hadn't gone further up and I had to agree with her. It was probably due to the fact that I'd had to climb out of the waist deep snow several times with all my gear and had used up more energy than I'd bargained on especially having only eaten breakfast so far. It was a welcome relief to come over the crest and see the carpark again!



Phew!

I was very relieved when we got to the bottom and while Wendy wanted to go to the café I felt so bad I had to go straight to the car. It was 12.45pm when I slumped into my seat and sat back feeling very rough. Annoyingly there was

only one Snow Bunting up on the picnic tables, but it kept coming and going and didn't settle, so I gave up on the idea of getting photos. I reckoned I'd be better going back in the morning anyway before all the disturbance and given I felt ill I wasn't that bothered at the time. When Wendy got back she'd bought me an Irn Bru, which was just what I needed with my lunch to get my blood sugar levels back up. After we'd finished it started to snow again and Wendy went out and put loads of seed down for the birds, which were nowhere to be seen but would be back at some point. I checked to see how many steps our walk had been and having not got very far I was surprised to see that we had done 12,000 already.

We drove away at 12.34pm and although Wendy was telling me I might be better going back to HQ I headed straight for our second stop of the day. I reckoned that I'd start feeling better after my lunch, so I kept my fingers crossed that it'd kick in soon. We arrived at Hayfields car park at 1.45pm and as it wasn't that cold we changed out of our heavy snow boots before doing anything else. I suddenly realized that if I drove a few yards down the road to Allt Ban car park we could walk directly to the river where we hoped there'd be a Dipper. Last year it'd been the best Dipper location we'd ever found but having 'been there and done that' before we knew that nothing is ever nailed on, so there wasn't any guarantee that they'd be there again. It was worth a shot though and would be a pleasant riverside walk if nothing else. Lyca must've thought we weren't going to bother and was being very vocal in the back seat as I drove down road. She was driving us mad but soon shut up when I parked up again and got her out for her second walk of the day at 1.53pm.

Unfortunately, it was raining as we set off down the path along the river but luckily it didn't last long.



Dipper river

We hadn't got very far when Wendy chirped up with, "There's one!" so I looked down stream, spotted the bird and said, "And another!" I couldn't believe my luck that we had 2x **Dippers** just ahead of us feeding and swimming around as if we weren't there. I handed Lyca over to Wendy, who was happy to sit against a tree and watch them, while I slowly made my way over to get some video. I was half expecting the birds to fly off, but they didn't and let me get the closest I've ever been to a Dipper. I set my camera and tripod up and actually got some

footage of them, which I was gutted to find later, wasn't as good as I'd hoped. Videoing seems to be a lot harder than photography!



Videoing Dippers

Unbeknown to me I'd committed a classic school boy error and had been shooting through some grass for some of it.....Doh!



Video grab

Luckily I'd managed to get some of them in the clear though, so all was not lost.....Phew! Happy with what I'd got we carried on up the path until we got to Lycas favourite paddling spot, Loch Morlich.



In her element

Needless to say, she pulled me all the way over to the water where she paddled around in what must've been freezing cold water seeing as most of the loch was still frozen over bar the edges. She didn't seem to care though and looked like a pig in **** as she wagged her tail and trotted up and down. The sun was out by then and the scenery was amazing, so Wendy took loads of photos and wanted to stop the clock.....again!



Loch Morlich

After tearing them both away we headed back and the Dippers where nowhere to be seen, so we'd been very lucky to have been in the right place at the right time for a change earlier. It was also nice to have finally pinned down a Dipper spot that has worked for 2 years running!

It was still only 2.53pm when we got back to the car, so I drove down the road to the main Loch Morlich beach car park and parked up. I was hoping for a nice Goldeneye in close to video but they were too far away to make it worth my while, but Wendy got out to take in the views and got more photos. It really is a

stunning place and Wendy reckoned it was so nice she could've stayed there forever.



Stop the clock!

It was 6.5c too, which we weren't expecting but when a minibus full of teenagers pulled up we didn't think it was quite warm enough yet for T-shirts! They all bailed out and headed down to the water's edge with one of them taking it to the next level by doing a back flip over a rock! Next up we stopped off at the Rothiemurchus Centre to pick up some pressies, so Wendy was in her element. I thought she was there for the rest of the day and when we'd piled up all our goodies onto the counter there was so much I had to go to the car to get one of our big shopping bags. So much for picking up a couple of bits! After that Wendy nipped into the Aviemore Tesco and when she got back in the car a very nice woman walked past and said, "Where about in the Isle of Man are you from?" Wendy told her and she went on to say that her son lived in Colby, which although is a bit too far away to get to visit him very often is a lot nearer than New Zealand where her daughter lives! She was really friendly and we felt sorry for her that her family is so far away but Wendy told her they must be mad to have moved away from such a beautiful place. On our way home I reckoned we should go and find the tip because we've never known where it is and always miss out on any interesting Gulls that are reported every year we are up there. I'd finally pinpointed its whereabouts before we'd gone away this time, so I kind of knew where I was going.

We headed out of Aviemore and I spotted the sign for the tip and turned in to the road. I started driving up the track and we could hear Gulls calling already but didn't know how far in we could go. There was a bloke milling around behind the fence, so I got paranoid and turned around to leave. Wendy was flabbergasted and told me I was being stupid, so I turned around and went back for a second attempt. This time I drove up the muddy track to the top where we could see a huge pile of landfill with Gulls all over it. Nice!



Scenic!

It was 9c by then but given our location we weren't really inspired to get out and go for a walk. We had however ticked off another location for our "Dumps of the UK" collection and quite literally too. Unfortunately, wherever I stopped there was always something in the way so we couldn't really view it properly. We concluded that you'd probably have to wait for the Gulls to lift to stand any chance of picking out any white wings amongst them, so with that we left.

When we got back to HQ it was 4.15pm, so I went straight out to fill the feeders up again. I also put a jam sarnie out and set the cameras up but this time I put one in the woods to see if I could catch a Deer or something on it. Lyca had her tea and then went off to sleep while we had ours. Wendy had bought some Madras spices, which turned her same old soup into a curry and nicked some of my rice. Apparently it was really nice as was my crispy chicken in sweet and sour sauce, so we were both happy. After tea I had a look at my videos, which was when I found that my Dipper one wasn't as good as I'd thought and my Red Squirrel one wasn't good enough either, so I vowed that I'd try harder next time....Urrghhhhh! We watched a program called "Wild Britain" on channel 5, which didn't give off a very good message about our Wildlife at all, so we were left feeling a bit angry. The icing on the cake was the use of a captive Goshawk, which had been set up to catch and kill a similarly un-wild Grey Partridge and the threatening way in which they claimed Pine Martens could be visiting anyone's garden in the near future. After that we were pretty tired again, so went to bed at 10.09pm.

Wednesday 14th March

It was 7am when we woke up and obviously the first thing we did was check to see if any of the eggs had gone. We couldn't see the one I'd put on the table, so I wasted no time in getting out there with Lyca to check. It had indeed gone, so I quickly got the cameras in to have a look to see what had taken it. I waited with baited breath as I looked at the video clips until BINGO the garden had delivered again and we'd captured a **Pine Marten** taking the egg.....Yes!



Pine Marten

Wendy came running over to look and we were both very relieved that although it'd taken a while we'd got our Holy Grail coming to the feeding station. The camera in the woods had failed to get anything which was a shame. At least I knew that all I had to do was tweak the positioning of them later to hopefully get some better footage to look forward to tomorrow. The Red Squirrels and Cresties were back and kept me entertained while I had breakfast. I'd planned to go back to Cairngorm to try and get some video of the Snow Buntings and Wendy was happy to stay in and chill out, so at 7.59am I loaded up the car and headed off.

When I arrived at 8.25am I was glad we'd done the walk yesterday, as it was blowing an absolute gale. It was so bad that I struggled to open the car door and to even stand up when I got outside. There were a few Snow Buntings up at the picnic table, so I started making my way up there. This was easier said than done with the wind trying to blow me over and without Yak Trax I was slipping and sliding all over the place.....Eeek! I threw some seed down by the bench, but it just got blown away and ended up anywhere but where I wanted it. I tried to sit down by the seats in the stone wall circle but it was just far too windy for that, so I moved to the other side of it to try and get some shelter and hunkered down. The Snow Buntings were coming in to get the seed, but the wind was so strong they'd fly off straight away and into the heather. After failing to get anything yesterday I was determined to get something I could use and I wasn't going to give up until I had.



Video grab

My hands were so frozen by 9.05am that I couldn't do any more and gave up. I couldn't walk down the bank so had to slide down on my arse, so I didn't get blown over and back at the car I had to get in via the passenger side because I couldn't open my door! I don't think I've felt wind that strong before in my life! On the drive home my hands got more and more painful to a point where I was struggling to hold the steering wheel! I put my heaters on full blast and put one hand on at a time. After about 10 minutes of agony they finally started to calm down.....Phew!

I was back at HQ by 9.38am and Wendy told me that the Cresties hadn't been back since I'd left. I made myself a cup of tea, grabbed some biscuits and sat down at the window to see what else I could video in the comfort of a nice warm house. The Squirrels were performing well, so I took advantage of them while I could but the Cresties weren't playing.



Red Squirrel

They were coming in but taking a seed and flying straight off with it to eat elsewhere, so I didn't stand a chance of getting anything of them. A third Squirrel

had decided to come in which created a bit of a stir with the other two, so there was a lot of chasing around up and down trees to watch. It was getting too late to go out before lunch, so we decided we'd leave going out until after we'd eaten.

After a lazy start to the day we set off at 12.20pm to do a walk we'd found last year in Grantown-on-Spey. We only discovered it because there'd been a Hawfinch reported in the trees along the river, which we obviously didn't see but we'd enjoyed the walk regardless and always had it in mind to return. I parked up in the car park of Ladies Garden Wood (which always makes us chuckle) at 12.20pm but neither of us fancied a walk at all and would've been happier having a nap in the car like a right pair of old farts.....Urrghhhh! There was no getting away from the fact that Lyca needed a walk, so we dragged ourselves out of our seats and walked down the road to the bridge looking down over the river.



River Spey

Luckily when we got down there and took in the view of the River Spey with the mountains in the distance our motivation levels soon went up. We heard a call that up until that point we hadn't heard yet and looking into the garden of one of the houses over the road we found our first **Greenfinch** of the trip. We had a scan of the river from the bridge and found a couple of nice red-head **Goosanders**, which were also new for the trip and a bird we'd presumed we'd have seen a lot more of but hadn't. There was a pair of Dippers further up and it was such a nice walk that we didn't feel too bad carrying on through the forest instead of looping back to the car like last time. When we came across a pair of Goosanders on the river we tried to stalk them, so I could get a shot but as usual they were well ahead of us and kept swimming away. I wasn't going to give up that quickly though and we carried on until they both hauled out onto a rock in the middle of the river. This was going to be my best chance, so I handed Lyca over to Wendy and started to edge my way through the trees and as close to the river bank as I could get. They both knew I was there, so I had to be careful and fired off some shots just in case they flew, before slowly getting closer still. Unbelievably the birds didn't move, so I got a few shots before they both decided they'd had enough and swam off.....Booooo! I was anything but happy with what I'd got but it'd have to do.



Goosanders

Carrying on we heard a call we recognized and over on the other side of the bank was a **Grey Wagtail**, which was another first of the trip. We found another pair of Goosanders, which were becoming like buses and another Treecreeper. This bird was on the tree just ahead of us, so I decided to try for a shot of it seeing as they're tricky birds to capture and I still feel I need a better photo of one. Again, I handed Lyca over to Wendy and waited for it to work its way round the trunk.



Stealth mode

When it did I messed up my shot and it flew off to the next tree, so I followed it. It turned into a bit of a game of 'cat and mouse' until I finally got an ok-ish shot of the little ****. He won this time!



Treecreeper

To our left were some farm fields and we came across this weird looking thing that we have no idea what it was, but it made for an interesting photo.



No idea

There was a nice looking derelict building up on a hill with an amazing view that we imagined buying and doing it up. We're allowed to dream aren't we?



Need to win the lottery

Passing a field of sheep there were 32x Lapwing, some Curlew and a couple of Mistle Thrushes feeding in it. The Mistle Thrushes were quite close, so I tried to get a shot but as usual they flew off before I could even get them in the view finder. When we got to a bridge I checked my map and found that it was where we'd start to head back. The only problem was that there were 2 paths and we couldn't decide which one to take.



Decisions, decisions

One way would take us through some Community Woods and the other looked like it skirted around the outside and had a nice view (and according to the OS map it was the right way), so I decided on that one. We went through the gate and quickly found it was a dead end.

We were standing at a gate with a chain on it, so we couldn't open it to get into the woods but instead of going back to the entrance Wendy said we could climb over it and send Lyca under the gap below. She quickly climbed the gate and told me to pass Lyca through, but I stood scratching my head as to how she was going

to fit through a gap of about 4 inches! Ignoring my worries Wendy stuck her hand under the gap to encourage Lyca through and she started to wriggle herself underneath. I stood there horrified as she squeezed her head through and then seemed to get stuck on her shoulders....Uh oh! Wendy grabbed her harness, squashed her flat and gave her a bit of a pull until the poor dog popped out the other side like a cork wagging her tail excitedly. She'd enjoyed it even if I hadn't enjoyed watching! After I'd climbed the gate we headed through the woods, using my weird knack of being able to find an unseen track through nearly impassable trees. By our estimations it should have been about 50 yards away. How wrong we were! We found ourselves in an endless maze of dense trees and weaved our way through them for ages before we started to wonder if we'd ever get back on track.



Errrrr?

We'd yet again managed to get ourselves slightly lost and Lyca ended up getting herself stuck on something by trying to go under a fallen tree instead of jumping over it like she normally would! She must've remembered the gate incident, so we had to unhook her from a branch that had got caught up in her harness. In the end I checked my map to see where on earth we were and luckily it reckoned that we were nearly there, so we breathed a sigh of relief when we finally found the path.....Skillzzzz! That's the last time I listen to Wendy! We found another Dipper and commented at how many we'd seen on this trip and wondered why we'd struggled on others. Lyca started pulling like mad when we came across 2x **Roe Deer** and a Pheasant in the woods. None of them stuck around and were off like rockets as soon as they were onto us but if Lyca hadn't been on a lead we don't think we'd have ever seen her again! This is another reason why we don't let her loose when we walk her. Wendy then realized that she recognized the path we were on as being where we'd found a Crestie nest a few years ago as we had ended up much deeper in Grantown woods than last year. She even found the tree they'd nested in and we wondered if they still used it. There was no sign of any occupants yet, but we hadn't so much as heard a Crestie because they all seemed to be sticking near gardens still. By now we were feeling pretty tired and started to wonder if we'd ever get back to the car. We plodded on through the woods until at last we spotted the back of the houses we'd walked past at the start.....Yey!



Yey!

Our relief was short lived though, when we discovered that the path hit a dead end at the back of the gardens. We looked up and saw some people walking up on a path at the top of the extremely steep bank we were at the bottom of.....Urrghhhh! There was only one thing for it and that was to climb up the bank, so we a final burst of what little energy we had left we started to scramble our way up. Because it was so dry the soil was quite loose, so it was hard work and by the time we hauled ourselves onto the path we both had a serious case of jelly legs.



Steep!

Unfortunately, what goes up must go down and with our wobbly legs we had to go down the other side.....Urrghhh! We were more than a bit pleased when we got to the bottom and knew that it was all nice and flat back to the car. We finally heard a Crestie calling from the trees behind the houses, so no wonder we hadn't had any joy in the woods. It was 3.34pm when we got back to the car and although it had been our only walk of the day we'd clocked up a respectable 12.6km and 18,000steps. We stopped off at Nethybridge shop because I fancied

an ice cream and Wendy wanted to get some rice for her tea now she was hooked on turning her veggie concoction into curry.

It was only 4.12pm when we got home but we were really tired and had done more than enough. Lyca started scrounging for her dinner straight away and eventually Wendy gave in and ended up giving it to her early at 4.45pm. Lyca was leaping up in the air in anticipation while Wendy was getting it, so she must've been extremely hungry. So were we for that matter and after we'd had ours Wendy went off for a bath before we settled down to watch some TV. Lyca slept all evening until 8.45pm when she decided it was time for her yogurt an hour and a quarter early! Her body clock seemed to have gone a bit squiffy but seeing as we were heading off to bed early again at 10.10pm it would seem she wasn't the only one.

Thursday 15th March

Despite being so tired we were woken up a couple of times during the night by the wind. It was so strong that it sounded like a tree was going to fall on top of the house and flatten us all.....Urrghhh! Lyca then decided to try and get us up at 6.33am and while we tried to get her to go back to sleep we could hear Cresties calling outside. Luckily she dozed off again and then woke up again at 8am, which was a much more respectable hour....Phew! Having slept in I had a horrible thought and rushed out as quickly as I could to get the cameras in, leaving Lyca inside and going nuts at the door. I had to make sure they hadn't overwritten due to being out for so long especially as I could see that both eggs had gone. We'd obviously had our visitor back again but all I could do was cross my fingers that the footage was still there and hadn't been replaced by some video of Chaffinches! I let Lyca out before I checked to put her out of her misery and then sat down to have a look at what we had. Luckily the videos hadn't overwritten and we had footage of a Pine Marten again, which visited us 4 times in total and early on in the evening too. On one occasion at 8.04pm it came in and grabbed an egg but dropped it on the ground. It obviously smashed and although it was out of shot we could hear the Pine Marten licking up the contents noisily. Unfortunately the camera had focused on the background, so the footage was out of focus, which was a major downer.





It was also interesting to discover that we actually had not 1 but 2 Badgers coming to the feeders and that they were happy enough to feed together, so were probably family members. While I was doing that and having breakfast Wendy made the sarnies and seeing as tomorrow was going to be so hectic and the weather wasn't looking too clever we had a relaxed start to our last full day. There seemed to be more birds than ever coming to the feeding station and not only that, but a third Red Squirrel had turned up. This sparked a lot of chasing between them all and we could've watched them running around and leaping through the branches of the trees all day, but we had to get going as we planned to visit the Black Isle. While Wendy got ready I took Lyca down the drive to the bin out by the road to dispose of some poo bags that had accumulated at the side of the house. Lyca performed, so at least we didn't have to worry about that while we were on the road.

We eventually left at 10am and it was absolutely freezing outside and felt like the coldest day so far. Despite that my car was reading a balmy 3.5c and all the small ponds at the side of the drive had completely thawed out from being frozen solid when we'd arrived. All the ponds at the side of the 'main' roads had thawed too and when we got to Boat of Garten we spotted our first **Common Gull** of the trip in a field. Having drunk her usual pint of cappuccino and then 2 cups of tea it wasn't long before Wendy was moaning that she needed to find a WC. After Inverness and crossing the bridge onto the Black Isle we recognized a town we were driving through. We knew that there were some toilets up a side street opposite a Dr's surgery, so I headed straight there. Typically they were locked, so it was back to the drawing board, although neither of us knew of any others and doubted there'd be any en route.....Uh oh! I kept going until we were in the middle of nowhere and there wasn't a toilet to be seen, so Wendy was getting more desperate by the minute.

We still hadn't found any by the time we arrived at the up side of Chanonry Point by the campsite, but I parked up, so we could have a scan out to sea anyway. We'd never driven on that side of Chanonry point before and even though it was pretty dead on first glances and there was no sign of any Dolphins it was still interesting to see the area.



Choppy

Eventually we found **Kittiwake** and **Grey Seal** but due to the strong wind it was really hard to find anything on the rough sea. It was a bit like being at the Point of Ayre on a bad day! Next, we spotted **Guillemot** and **Fulmar** then finally a nice red-head **Red-breasted Merganser** but we gave up after that to reinstate our toilet hunt. Luckily we stumbled across some as I drove out from the beach, so Wendy was very relieved....Phew! While I waited for her I discovered that I had brown stains on my trousers, which looked dodgy but was actually melted chocolate....Urrghhhh! Wendy gave me one of her Barbary Coast wipes to try and get the worst of it off, but it didn't look good even after a scrub. Typical of my luck!

After our detour I set off again and it wasn't long before we found ourselves in familiar territory. Even though we hadn't been there since our first visit a few years ago we recognized Fairy Glen, which we had no idea was so near to Chanonry Point. I followed the signs and turned up a single-track road to Cromarty and we spotted some **Hooded Crows** feeding in a field. I'd decided that we'd take a drive right round the Black Isle and see what was about, seeing as we normally just head straight out again after visiting Chanonry Point. Our first impressions of Cromarty weren't very good when we clapped eyes on the sprawl of various huge gas rigs scattered around the inlet, but we found a car park and I parked up.



A bit grim

Looking out over the sea we found a **Shag** and then all of sudden it didn't seem so bad after all when we noticed a flock of 20+ **Long-tailed Ducks** bobbing about on the waves. This was more like it! They were mainly females but I got out and wandered over to try for some video anyway.



Video grab

It was interesting to watch them diving and the males were flying ahead of the females and landing back in the water as though it was some kind of display behaviour. While I was out doing that we both noticed a **Red-throated Diver** flying past and another female RBM. Two more RTD's flew past on the exact same path the other had taken as well as 3x **Eiders**, 2 of which were males, but I gave up after that and headed back to the car. We left at 12.20pm and I followed the coast road overlooking the sea, but we hadn't got far when Wendy spotted one of the birds we'd hoped to see in that neck of the woods. I looked down to see a nice **Slavonian Grebe**, which was pretty close in and then she found another but there was nowhere for me to pull over, so I had no choice than to keep driving.....straight past them! Typical! Scanning the bay, we found our first **Razorbill** of the trip and admired the view of the town of Nigg on the other side. The drive along the coast was very nice and all it was lacking was for an Otter to pop up with a fish but obviously that was a bit of a tall order. There was a lovely male RBM really close in but again I had to drive straight past it due to there being nowhere to park. We spotted some **Wigeon** out in the sea and a **Redshank** feeding along the shoreline and then we found a small car park, which I headed straight for. There was already a Tours Bus parked up in the best spot and a load of people scanning the water with scopes, so I just dumped the car where I could. Looking out over the Cromarty Firth it was surprisingly dead apart from a huge flock of **Scaup**, which we couldn't sniff at. They were far too distant to even contemplate getting anything decent of.

When the others all bailed into the vehicles I saw this as my cue to move the car into their spot for a better angle on everything, while we ate our lunch.



Cromarty Firth

After we'd finished Wendy got out of the car to get some photos and also to see if there was a footpath we could walk on. There wasn't, so I got out with Lyca and walked her down to the water, so she could tick off the Cromarty Firth as a paddling spot.



Paddle tick

Unbelievably she didn't seem too keen and after getting her paws wet and having a wee she pulled me all the way back to the car. Strange dog! It was 1.08pm by then and I really wanted a shot of a Slav before we carried on, so we went back to see if they were still there. We found another and yet again there wasn't any laybys but fortunately we found one near one of the original birds, so I parked up. I grabbed my camera gear and when it dived I started to walk towards it. It was just my luck that this bird was a bit of a moult mess but it was still a Slav Grebe, so I started firing off some shots and got some video.



Video grab

A **Cormorant** swam past while I was down there and when I was happy that I'd got something useable I headed back to the car. I turned the car round and we carried on finding the Scaup a lot closer in and waders everywhere, which would've been great for photos but again there were no laybys.....Grrrrrrr! I drove through Jemimaville and found the hide we were looking for at Udale Bay at 1.31pm.



Hide

This was a brilliant hide, which had been built at the side of the road and although the tide was out and all the birds were miles away, we went in for a look anyway. All we could see were Wigeon and **Shelduck** and just wished we'd been there at high tide.



Bet it's great at high tide

There was no point hanging around, so we carried on to Newhall Point, which overlooked Udale Bay and Invergordon.



Newhall Point

Again, there was nothing about due to the low tide, so we were on our way again by 1.53pm passing a field full of **Pink-footed Geese**. We saw a huge bridge going over the Firth and saw our first 2 Red Kites after we'd left the Black Isle and were in Easter Kinkell.



Long bridge

This was unusual as we always see them on the Black Isle, so we just hoped that it wasn't due to illegal persecution. We saw another Red Kite just before we drove through Beaulieu and then another, so they were obviously doing well around there. There were 100's of Pinkies in a farm field and we couldn't believe it when we saw that the temperature was 8c!

Before we came out I'd found a place called Abriachan Woodland Paths, which was meant to be good for Black Grouse and wanted to give it a go, so we didn't have to rely solely on the Amulree road on the way home. When we arrived it was 2.38pm and the sky looked blacker than anywhere else in the whole of Scotland. I parked up in the car park and we got out to find an info board or map to see which way to go. There were paths everywhere and no map, which left us confused as to which one to take. For being another one of those Scotland Community Projects it seemed more centred around flashy buildings than trails through the woods. It was almost like the woodland part was a cover to get better funding or something. I didn't have a mobile signal either, so I couldn't even check the maps on my phone, so we set off down one that looked like it was heading in the right direction only to find ourselves lost in some kind of nightmarish children's play area.....Noooooo!



Noooooooo!

The only saving grace was that there were absolutely no screaming brats there and although it looked good, if you had kids to entertain, it wasn't exactly what we had in mind. Every path we took lead to more kids play areas, which were all dead ends and Wendy quickly lost the will and wanted to leave. We could see the forest ahead of us, but it was just a case of finding the right path to get us up to it. Eventually we found it and were finally on the right track, but Wendy's relief was short lived when we saw what lay ahead of us.



Oh great, another hill!

The path quickly started to climb uphill and just to rub salt in the wounds it looked really wet and muddy too. At this stage of the game Wendy was feeling quite tired and another hill wasn't a welcome sight but I carried on regardless leaving her no choice but to have to follow us....Hahaha! To be honest I was pretty tired myself but having made the effort to get there and knowing that it was the last hill of the trip I wasn't leaving before I'd seen my plan through. We started to climb up the steep hill towards the forest trying to dodge the worst of the deep puddles and mud as best we could. As we puffed and panted our way

up a woman walking her dog came up behind us and left us miles behind her, which was pretty shameful for us!



Nice view

We could hear **Redpoll** and Siskin calling from the trees and I finally got a mobile signal and stopped to check the map. There were two routes but given our current state I chose the shortest route, much to Wendy's delight. Further up and the path was covered in snow and quite slippery under foot, but we made it up to a viewpoint at the top and stopped to catch our breath.



Puff pant!

By the time we'd got up there and stood admiring the view even Wendy was glad we'd done it. Having ditched off the longer walk we started to head back down, which was interesting with it being a bit icy/snowy in parts. When we got to the bottom we headed down a road that was obviously used by the Forestry Commission and it was thick with snow, so Lyca was having a blast :P.



Mad dog!

She was leaping about all over the place with her tail wagging like mad. We walked past a logging area and all of a sudden we started to wonder if we'd gone wrong somewhere along the line. The way back seemed to be taking an awfully long time given the fact that, as the crow flies, the car park wasn't that far away. I checked my phone map again and it reckoned we were bang on track, so we just carried on and hoped for the best. We eventually spotted the car park ahead of us and were back at the car at 3.54pm. The big black clouds were still hanging over us and we were very surprised that it hadn't rained, not that we were complaining! I went off to the WC's to see if there was a bin to put the poo bag I'd put by the car in but there wasn't, so it had to come with us :/.

It was 4.01pm when we left and after I'd driven past Loch Ness I didn't bother to put a detour around Inverness into my sat nav. I reckoned that it couldn't be that hard seeing as it's not that big as far as cities go. Whoops! As we got further and further in I realised my mistake and we were also bang on rush hour, so it was total chaos. When I reached a massive roundabout with lanes joining all over the place, I was glad to have a car which accelerates quickly to get me out of trouble when I need it. If I had a slow car I reckon I'd still be waiting there now! Unbelievably, I managed to negotiate the way through without getting beeped at which I reckoned deserved a high five. Phew! When we got to Ruthven we noticed that the road was wet and at Slochd the wind picked up and it started raining, so even though it'd been grey and overcast, we'd been really lucky to have dodged the worst weather.....Yey! I needed to get something for my tea as well as more bird seed, so we hoped that the Boat of Garten shop was still open. It was 5.04pm when we pulled up outside and luckily it was, so we grabbed a pizza and some seed and headed for home. The rain stopped and the road seemed to be dry at Loch Garten but was wet again as we approached the house.

We arrived back at 5.18pm and while Wendy sorted Lyca's tea out and put the oven on to cook my pizza I went out to fill the feeders up. I couldn't set the cameras up because for some bizarre reason they wouldn't work and I needed to think long and hard about where would be the best place to put them. After tea we had our baths and started packing up our stuff. Needless to say, we both felt pretty depressed at the thought of leaving and just to rub salt in the wounds it looked like our crossing was going to be another rough one :(Eventually I got

the cameras to work so I put the them out and hoped for the best and we watched TV until we reluctantly went to bed at 10.30pm.

Friday 16th March

Having such a long day ahead of us we wanted to get as much sleep as possible, but we were awake at 6.40am! It was probably a good thing with having so much to do before we left, so we got up. Peering out of the curtains it was spitting with rain and the Squirrels were there stuffing their faces at the feeders. I took Lyca out and got the cameras in to see if I'd got any better footage than previously. When I looked at it the Pine Marten had been in 4 times during the night but I was gutted to see that all the footage was out of focus in the middle of the screen again, so I started to wonder if I actually had a faulty camera :(.



Wow!

The weather forecast was predicting significant snow on the A9, so we started to rethink our day. Instead of sticking around and risking the snow getting bad I reckoned we should just do a short walk at Inshriach for Lyca and then clear the A9 and stop somewhere else after we'd hopefully gone past the worst of it. We really didn't need such a big fly in the ointment but there wasn't much we could do about it. After we'd had breakfast we set about doing the cleaning and the last of the packing. While I was having my breakfast and watching the action from the window for the last time a Sparrowhawk zoomed past the window and landed up in the branches of a tree. Everything scarpered pretty quickly and the Sprawk didn't catch anything, which was good but not for it obviously. I started to take the bags out to load the car up and a Crestie flew into a tree above me just to make it even harder to leave, I reckoned he had come to say bye and thanks for the food :). When it came time to get Lyca's harness and lead on she refused to move from her chair, which wasn't very helpful, so she obviously didn't want to go either!



I'm not going anywhere!

It was 9.45am when we shut the door for the last time and waved, "Goodbye" to Rymore Wood Lodge.....Boo Hoo :(! Wendy looked very sad as I drove away and the only thing she wanted to do was go and sit on her rock at Loch Garten. When we arrived she mournfully got out of the car and walked over to the water and sat on her rock and had one of her 'moments' and wished that she could stop the clock and stay forever. The Loch was so calm and all she could hear was the sound of the birds in the surrounding forest.....Bliss!



And relax

The birdsong included the calls of Cresties, so when she came back to the car she got me to drive over to the car park for a last look. There were no feeders up, which was unusual and as soon as I parked up birds started to come in from every angle. They must've got so used to photographers coming in with their own feeders that they thought we had food for them. It was a shame we didn't and there was no sign of any Cresties either, so we didn't stay for long. We had to get a decent dog walk in somewhere before the long drive to Heysham, so we made a snap decision to do the walk nearby to Loch Mallachie. We hadn't done

that walk since the first time we went to Abernethy all those years ago! I parked up in a car park near Loch Mallachie at 10am and we set off down a footpath into the Caledonian Pine Forest.



Last walk

The path led us down to the northern shore of Loch Garten, where Lyca had a paddle.



Paddling

The water seemed very red, so I can only assume there's a lot of iron in the rocks? Carrying on we came out at Loch Mallachie and although Lyca pulled me all the way down to the water's edge it was far too deep for her.



Lovely

We followed the path along the Loch side until it started to head into the Forest to return on the short loop path. Instead of turning back I checked the map on my phone and decided to just keep going. There was nobody else about, so we had the entire forest to ourselves and we could hear Cresties calling around us, which was a perfect last walk in The Highlands. The walk seemed to go on forever and we wondered if we'd ever start heading back. After what felt like forever we came onto a path the side of the road that took us back to the car park. It was 11.35am when we got back and at 9km the walk had been much longer than we'd expected, having thought it was just a 2km loop.....Whoops! There were more cars parked up than when we'd arrived earlier and after walking back down the path to retrieve the poo bag we set off at 11.40am to prepare to leave. Due to having done a much longer walk than we'd expected it meant we had to ditch off the Inshriach walk, but in the grotty weather I wasn't upset by that.

A Red Squirrel ran across the road near the bridge at Boat of Garten and I pulled up outside the shop to get rid of the offending bag into the bin outside. We went in to get some Irn Bru and sweets to keep me awake on the drive, a pan au chocolat and Wendy couldn't resist a hot cheese and spinach pasty. We shared the pasty back at the car and even I had to agree that it was very tasty.....Om nom nom :). As we drove to our next stop we were treated to some Speyside Radio, which was torturous! Neither of us had ever heard any of the songs they were playing and nor did we want to again! It was snowing in Aviemore and a Sparrowhawk flew across the road on the approach to the petrol station. I filled my car up and went into the shop, which had been recently turned into a M&S Simply Food shop. Unfortunately, this meant that every single person who was getting petrol was also doing a food shop at the same time, so there were queues forming at the petrol pumps. When I finally went in to pay the queues were slow moving, so it took much longer than I'd expected. My next plan was to visit the Potting Shed at Inshriach Nurseries to get my cake fix. The signs were flashing that the ski area from Glenmore was closed, which was probably due to the strong wind rather than snow, so we'd been very lucky during the week to get up there. Another Red Squirrel ran across the road at Inshriach and we both agreed that we'd seen more Squirrels over the past week than on any of our other Scotland trips. As I went to pull into the car park for Inshriach Nurseries Wendy

shrieked, "It's closed!" I didn't believe her to start with, but I looked round and saw that the gate was closed and reading the board outside it looked as though they'd changed their opening hours. Nooooo! This was the first time we'd been there on this trip and broken the tradition of having cake from the best cake shop in the world, so I was gutted :(We drove past our old haunt 'Ord Cottage' at Feshiebridge and noticed that for some reason a lot of the trees behind the house had been cleared. We'd really struggled to pull in Red Squirrels and Cresties there in the past, but it was a good cottage to fall back on and now it looks as though there'd be no point going there ever again! When we got to Loch Insh we thought we'd stop for lunch and in sheer desperation see if the female Osprey had returned massively early yet, although we didn't think for a second that we'd be that lucky.

I parked up at 12.32pm next to a Mountain Sports van and we had a quick look over the road at the Osprey nest, which as expected was still empty. The pair at Rutland were already back but we were just too early for any of the Scottish ones. We grabbed our lunch from the back and started eating only to realise that we'd be cringing through it. The van was there for some kind of work related team building course and the leader was hideously hyperactive not to mention uninhibited! He was trying to make the group copy him by dancing around like a *** and let's just say it wasn't a good look. The majority of them looked, to put it mildly, very awkward while they made total idiots of themselves and I could barely stand to watch them and chose not to in the end.



Team building?

A couple of blokes were sitting it out on a bench and I can't say I blamed them, it's the stuff of nightmares! With all that embarrassing stuff going on we didn't hang around after we'd eaten and drove away at 12.59pm to start the long drive home.

We didn't have any plans for the day other than to get out of the bad weather that was around the Cairngorms and find somewhere to walk Lyca once we'd cleared it. I'd found a National Trust place called The Hermitage at Dunkeld just north of Perth that ticked all the boxes and would be perfect, so I crossed my fingers the weather would permit. On one stretch of road we came across loads of Red-legs, most of them ran into the hedge but 2 of them ran backwards and

forwards as though they were dicing with death and having a game of Chicken! It was meant to be snowing south of Dalwhinnie but when we got there it was just dreary old rain. We were sad when we saw the sign saying we'd just left the Cairngorms National Park at 1.49pm and Wendy reckoned we should just turn around and go back. For some reason Wendy instantly pointed the finger at me when a bad smell wafted her way (I can't imagine why :P). My guts were just fine and I was totally innocent, so it had to be Lyca! We have no idea why, but she spent the next half an hour being a right little wind machine, which when you're cooped up in car is anything but pleasant. Maybe that was her way of protesting after we'd made her leave her favourite holiday cottage? The rain was still lashing down when we got to Dunkeld, so although The Hermitage looked like an amazing walk I had no choice but to give it a miss and hope that we'd find somewhere else.

This was a disaster, as we were now 3 hours ahead of schedule with no plans to fill the time. Even if we got to the pub at tea time and had some food there was no way we could stay there until we left for Heysham! We started to wish we'd booked a Travelodge room like we'd planned for our October trip. We'd had to leave early in the morning to avoid a storm so unfortunately our master plan never came to fruition in the end, but it'd been a great idea. The idea kept going round and round in our heads, so it was still an option. Carrying on along the road from The Hermitage I realised that we were on the road to the bottom end of the Amulree road, which we were again avoiding to give the massively slow route through Kenmore a miss. As we were way ahead of schedule I decided to go have a look from the bottom end and we turned off onto the Amulree Road at 2.25pm. It was a bit risky though as the rain had turned to sleet and the sleet quickly turned to snow.

Luckily it wasn't sticking but it was a very dark, cold and grim scene that lay ahead of us. Our chances of seeing Black Grouse looked slim as the conditions were terrible! We were actually surprised at how many birds were in the fields and there seemed to be more than usual. There were Redshanks, Oystercatchers, Curlews, Mistle Thrushes and Song Thrushes just in one field by the car. There were Canada Geese on the opposite side of the road and with the birds being so close I thought I'd take advantage of a photo opportunity. As soon as I moved the birds all flew off further down the field, so Wendy grabbed a scenery shot and we carried on.



Wintery

It still haunts me to this day that it took me so long to attempt a photo of the really close Black Grouse a few years before, so Amulree is always bitter sweet as I get Vietnam style flashbacks (not quite) when I go back. We really didn't expect to see any this time though and given the awful weather we reckoned they'd be up the willows to get out of it, but we couldn't leave without even trying. Having so much time on our hands was starting to really worry us and we had no idea what we were going to do with ourselves until the 2.15am sailing home. I had to pull in at a layby to let a tractor past but before I drove off my eyes wandered to the left and I couldn't quite register what I was seeing. In the field by the side of the road were not 1 but several large black blobs. Not wanting to make the same mistake as last time I quickly got my brain into gear and called it to Wendy. There was a very wet **Black Grouse** really close to the car and when we looked closer there were actually 3x males and our first ever female :O! We couldn't believe our luck but I HAD to get a shot this time after my epic fail last time. I'd never live it down if the same thing happened again, so my heart was in my mouth. I reversed up the road, so I could get my gear out of the car from a safe distance and they just carried on feeding as though we weren't there, so I got some video....Phew! It was so horrible outside that I got back in the car and drove back to the layby, so I could shoot from the comfort and dryness of my seat. It was freezing and chucking it down outside but I started getting some footage and shots, which wasn't easy especially with it being so dark and dismal. I wasn't entirely happy with the position of the car, so seeing as I already had something and it wouldn't be a disaster if I flushed them, I reckoned I should drive up the road and turn the car around so I could shoot out of my side of the window. It was still snowing as I drove down the road and we noticed another bird behind a tuft of grass, which had been out of view before. We were now looking at 5 birds, which only having seen the odd 1 or 2 before was just unbelievable, we'd never seen so many together! I turned around but there was no layby on that side, so I just had to pull over and get Wendy to keep an eye out for any cars. I got into position to get a better angle on things, which worked a treat and I was able to stay inside and better my existing video, so I was happy as Larry.



Black Grouse

I could've stayed there all day, which Wendy and Lyca wouldn't have been very keen on and luckily for them what happened next pulled the plug on it. We heard the sound of a noisy engine and looked up to see a Tractor hurtling towards us. As it got closer the birds lifted and flew off over the road and landed in the willows at the bottom of the field. They were well and truly gone, so I packed up my camera and we carried on our way.

By then we'd already decided that we wanted to try and book a room somewhere and when we got to Crieff I parked up in the car park of the Co-op. Wendy ran in to get some bits while I started searching for the nearest Travelodge to Heysham. I found one in Burton-in-Kendal so quickly booked it....Sorted :). It was going to cost us £62 but our eta was 6.30pm, so with the weather being so bad and having nothing to do we reckoned it would be worth every penny. We headed off at 3.41pm with a mission to get there as quickly as possible, so we could relax. By the time we got to Annandale Water Services it was 5.20pm and Wendy needed a WC break and reckoned we should give Lyca her dinner. I took Lyca out for a wee while Wendy got her food ready for when she got back. Lyca, who should've been starving, ate all the carrots, left the rest and then started trying to get into the front seat with Wendy.....Grrrrr! Sometimes when she's being fussy if you give her a dentastick she'll go back and eat her dinner after finishing it, so we gave that a go. Lyca demolished her dentastick and then surprisingly turned her nose up at her dinner again, so we gave up. Wendy nipped in to the WC's before we left and we were on the last leg of the journey at 5.36pm.

We were pleased to see the 'Welcome to England - Cumbria' sign at 5.55pm and just over an hour later I parked up in the car park of the Burton-in-Kendal Travelodge at 6.58pm.....Phew! I lugged all the important cases to the room with us and as soon as we let ourselves in Lyca went mad and started rolling around on the floor, so she seemed happy at least. She then went nuts to get a drink but Wendy had forgotten her bowl, so I had to go back to the car to get it as well as her remaining food. She proceeded to drink a whole bowl of water and then needed a top up before finally eating her dinner. After the most important stuff had been dealt with (:P) we sat down to eat our second sarnie of the day while we listened to the wind howling outside. It sounded horrendous, so I

checked the weather again and saw that the wind was a force 6 but was gusting 8, so a bit choppy! Wendy wasn't best pleased by that prospect, but The Ben had left Douglas and was on its way over, so it couldn't have been that bad. At least it wouldn't be like last October and all the stress that went with it! Wendy decided to go for a bath but forgot that you only get a limited amount of hot water so when she went back to check it, it was lukewarm. She endured it anyway and then came back into the room to watch some TV and ended up falling asleep, as did Lyca.



That's better than sitting in the car

While they both slept I just couldn't settle and stayed awake having to listen to both of them snoring....Urrghhh!

Saturday 17th March

I woke Wendy up to tell her we needed to get going and as usual she was still half asleep and grumpy. We went to reception to hand the key back and the bloke behind the desk said, "You going so soon?" When we told him we had to get the ferry home he looked more than a bit concerned and said, "Errrrr, if it's going, it's very windy out there!" It did sound pretty bad and we started to worry but Wendy laughed and told him that if it was cancelled we'd be back. He assured us that the room was ours until 12pm that afternoon, so even though it'd already been worth the extra cash we also had it to fall back on in case we needed it. We left at 12.19am but the motorway was closed and the gritters were out, so I had to drive north up the M6 to get back on track down south by going on the back roads, which meant going around the houses a bit.....Grrrrrr! This wasn't what I needed at such an ungodly hour but eventually we reached Asda at 1am. I filled my car up with petrol and let Lyca out for a wee, so that was another job done. It was 1.09am when we parked up in lane 2 at Heysham which was our latest ever, so the Travelodge tactic worked a treat. Wendy really didn't like the sound of the wind. It was really strong and to make matters worse there weren't many cars waiting to board, so the boat didn't look like it'd be very heavy :(. Wendy wanted to be back at the Travelodge asleep, but the foot passengers were called as soon as we parked up, so we hoped that we wouldn't have to wait too long either. We waited for the freight to load up and were called to start boarding at 1.38am, excellent! We couldn't wait to get to the cabin but, all of a sudden we were

stopped again to let more containers on, so it was 1.45am when we finally boarded.....Urghhhh! There were loads of kit houses going on, so hopefully they'd weigh the boat down nicely to make our journey less rough. The bloke who let us on had his sleeves rolled up, so he must've been feeling the heat, although it was only 3.5c :O! I had to stop on the ramp, which I hate doing, due to a backlog of cars parking up but we breathed a sigh of relief when we let ourselves into the cabin at 1.53am. The announcement that we were off came at 2.10am and the Captain said it was a force 6-7 but as we left Heysham it was unbelievably calm, so we fell asleep instantly. We slept for the entire crossing and were only woken by the announcement that we would shortly be in Douglas but that the ship might roll when it turned into the harbour to dock. We didn't like the sound of that much after having a terrible roll coming in in October but luckily enough this time it never happened...Phew!

It was 5.59am when we arrived back at the house and Wendy and Lyca went straight back to bed while I refused and stayed up to get all the luggage in and then packed away as quietly as possible. Wendy was woken up again by the roofers at 8am but said it'd been worth it for a couple of extra hours. The roof seemed to be nearly finished, which was a great relief and all they had to do next was clean and paint the exterior. We'd been up for a while and the blokes were busy jet washing and cleaning up after doing the roof. When I went down to the sunroom to let Lyca out I noticed dirty black water sprayed all over the inside wall and ceiling by the door, so I quickly wiped the worst of it off before Wendy saw it and freaked out. She'd had the sunroom totally gutted and redone 3years ago, but the power of the jet wash had forced the water through gaps around the door and made a right mess. Uh oh! A bit later Wendy went into the living room and was horrified to see water running down the inside wall.....Nooooo! We were both still feeling half dead after the day before and when she went into her bedroom she found more water running down the wall in there. She rushed down to the sunroom to find water running down the wall and across the ceiling, so she legged it back up to the living and opened the balcony door to tell the bloke to stop. He packed away the jet washer and we tried in our dazed state to dry the worst of it off before it soaked into the carpets. Welcome home!

I'd driven 1,070miles in total and Rymore Wood Lodge hadn't disappointed, like we feared it might do. We actually think it'd been even better this time around and would certainly book it again. Even though the feeders had been empty when we arrived it didn't take the birds very long to come back at all. Even the Badgers and Pine Marten were quick to catch on that there was food for them, which was brilliant. We had managed to explore new places again and we'd enjoyed all the walks we'd done especially the more challenging ones where we'd had to cross rivers and walk in the snow with Yak Trax. My massive risk of only taking the Sigma zoom lens went OK. In the days with a lack of light it struggled a bit but the reduction of weight when walking outweighed that problem easily! We were so glad we'd booked the Travelodge on the way back, it saved us a lot of hours' worth of boredom. Also, if the boat hadn't gone at least we'd have had somewhere to stay for the night even though it was a bit out of the way for getting to or from Heysham. We'd only failed to see Ptarmigan and Golden Eagle, which was a shame but they're 2 very hit and miss birds anyway, so we weren't too bothered. It would've been nice to have left with the full Scottish specialty set, but that would just be asking too much :).

Link to the video I put together
<https://youtu.be/GrYhTsL6R5E>

Map

