

Scotland Trip – March 2012

By March we were desperate to get away again and were dying to go back to Scotland to try for the 'biggies' we'd dipped on last time. When we discovered that the Ben-My-Chree would soon be out of action and prior to that the prices would be sky high due to it being Easter we had to make a quick decision. Would we go now or leave it till May? If we went this early we would be too early for some birds like Slavonian Grebe, Osprey and all the Woodland species but probably too late for others, potentially the reason why we failed to see the biggies last year. We would also run the risk of dreadful weather including snow, as March is slap bang in the ski season! After weighing it all up we bit the bullet, found a cottage giving a 30% last minute booking discount and went for it! I was so worried about the weather at that time of year I even took out holiday insurance in case gales or snow meant we couldn't get up there. Yet again I was sticking with the BirdGuides app to tell us of any rarities nearby but we weren't really expecting much up in the Highlands. I also switched to O2 from Virgin to see if O2 had better 3g coverage but more on that later!

Thursday 22nd March

Luckily Wendy wasn't at work so she could sort out the packing while I sat at work stressing out that I'd not done enough planning for the trip. I worked through my lunch so I could get out a bit earlier to get myself ready for the first stretch of the journey to Dumfries. We arrived at the Sea Terminal to find that it was really busy but there was only a slight wind so hopefully we could get a couple of hours sleep in the cabin. It was already too dark to do any seawatching and we only managed to see **Herring Gull** and **Feral Pigeon** at the dock. We boarded at 7.23pm and my heart sank when we were told to park up right by the funnel again. Does that space have my name on it or something? Urrghhhh! It was a very pleasant and smooth crossing so after watching a bit of TV we managed a quick nap. We didn't disembark until 11.50pm due to a very low tide, which had delayed the vessel ahead of us from leaving, so we were already slightly behind schedule. I'd estimated arriving at the Hotel by 2am but the stay would be very brief as we needed an early start if we were to pack everything into the day as well as make it up to Aviemore before 9pm :/.

Friday 23rd March

After Wendy had made her usual trip to the café for a coffee fix we set off at 12.08am. For the first time on any of our holidays we'd decided to break up the usual overnight drive by stopping off at a Travelodge. We decided to stay in Dumfries so that we could spend time visiting some sites in Dumfries and Galloway on the way up. There were also some long staying rarities close to our route that we could pop in to try and see as well. At 1.28am as we were heading out of Gretna Wendy called out, "**Barn Owl!**" Lovely :). We saw nothing else and arrived at the Travelodge at 1.50am where we literally dumped our bags and went straight to sleep.

We were woken up by the alarm at 6am feeling strangely refreshed. Even though we'd had less than 4hours sleep we felt a million times better than after the couple of hours sleep we usually get in the car. Looking out of the window we could see that it was grey and misty but at least it wasn't raining. As we were loading the car up we were surprised as to how much bird life there was in a small car park just off a motorway. There was **Rook, Blackbird, Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Great Tit, Robin, Starling, Chaffinch, Dunnock, Goldfinch, House Sparrow** and **Wren**. More interestingly a **Yellowhammer** singing in the field behind and a **Chiffchaff** singing in the trees next to the Hotel.....Cool. So far

we'd had no breakfast but had brought some cereal bars with us for this situation. Wendy hadn't had any coffee either so imagine her face light up when she spotted a Costa just next door.....then imagine it when she read the sign on the door saying that it was closed until 11am.....Hahahaha :P. I think she'd have happily stuck around till it opened but we had to get going and at 7.27am after breakfast in the car we drove away.

Nearby was my first obstacle of the drive, a massive roundabout. I'd researched it so as not to mess up and because I'd never driven this route before it was totally new territory for me. When I approached and positioned myself into what I thought was the correct lane I quickly realized that I had indeed messed up.....Oops! Luckily for me the road was pretty quiet or I would have been on the end of the usual mainlanders (lack of) patience! Panic over we were back on track and heading towards our first destination of Southernness and the landscape was farmland and countryside so it was quite a nice drive. We noticed how many **Lapwing** there were displaying over the fields compared to at home. We also saw **Carrion Crow**, **Great Black-back Gull**, **Common Buzzard** and **Pied Wagtail**. We then drove through New Abbey, which had a huge estuary, which we didn't fancy our chances of trying to find a small wader on!

As we arrived at Southernness at 8am we spotted a small group of 9 **Barnacle Geese**, which was good as our target was supposed to be hanging out with the Barnacles. There was nothing with them though so we carried on down the narrow road towards West Preston Farm seeing **Skylark** and **Pheasant**. There were **Linnets** too but nothing else. We tried several turnings but couldn't locate where I'd expected the large flock of geese would be. As a last ditch attempt we drove up another road, which wasn't the directions I'd read, and as we turned a corner we hit some fields caked in thousands and thousands of Geese.



They were a long way off but we could see that the vast majority were Barnacles so we must have found the flock. We got out into the freezing cold and scanned. We quickly found a couple of **Pink-footed Geese** amongst them as well as some **Lesser Black-back Gulls**. Scanning through so many geese at such a distance wasn't easy but after about 10 minutes I picked out our target bird, which was a lovely **Red-breasted Goose** and the 1st lifer for us both :). You would think a red bird would be easy to spot but it blended in amazingly with the other Geese.

Standing in the wind, shivering by the gate I couldn't summon up the energy to get the camera gear out and didn't bother attempting a record shot. We called it a day and left for our next stop of RSPB Mersehead, which is a place I'd been interested in seeing for a long time. On the way there we saw 2x **Buzzards** displaying and another sitting in a tree, which was great as so far in 2012 we were yet to see even one of our frustratingly elusive birds back at home.

We pulled in to the car park at RSPB Mersehead at 8.29am seeing **Greenfinch** from the car. Feeling the temperature outside we realized that we were going to have to get into warmer gear so we cracked open our bag and dug out the base layers (and Wendy's ski pants).....Brrrrrrrr! It's no easy task trying to get changed in a cramped car full of bags and equipment but with a lot of wrestling and impossible contortions we were probably good to go.....up Everest! On first impressions the reserve looked like it was closed, always a worry when you're out and about so early. Fortunately I was able to refer to my 'Where to watch birds in Scotland' book and read that it was open 24/7 and just the Visitor Centre was shut....Phew! Doubly lucky was finding a little wooden box containing free leaflets with a map of the reserve in them. We scuttled off as fast as we could (the wind was bitterly cold) and got to the Bruiach Hide at 9am and had a quick look for our target bird. Mersehead reserve had fantastic looking flooded fields and reedbeds, the type of thing we are screaming for in the IOM.



It looked pretty dead though and most birds were right at the back so we felt doubtful that we'd find our bird out there. We persevered though (through the weirdly positioned windows) and saw **Teal, Wigeon, Curlew, Pintail, Shoveler, Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Moorhen, Reed Bunting, Oystercatcher, Heron, Black-headed Gull, Canada Goose, Mute Swan and Blue Tit.**



We were just thinking about making a move when more Barnacle Geese flew in joined by a few **Whooper Swans**. We'd given it our best shot but left at 9.50am having just experienced our first dip of the trip (probably the first of many) which was Green-winged Teal :(We pulled over to view a roadside Loch but only found **Cormorant** and **Greylag** and as we passed through Dalbeattie at 10.09am we saw a single **Fieldfare**. By now it was starting to brighten up as the sun started to make its first appearance of the day through the clouds.

We were now heading towards RSPB Ken Dee Marshes and into Red Kite country, which again would be a totally new place for us both. This reserve is sandwiched between Farmland and Loch Ken with a few Hides placed in a Woodland area, which overlooks shallow areas of the Loch. They were supposed to have feeders up too so we hoped they would be full! As we turned in to approach the car park we saw our first **Red Kite** and more Buzzards shortly followed by another Red Kite then another and another.....you get the picture. There were more Red Kites and Buzzards than you could shake a stick at.... brilliant :). We pulled up in the car park at 10.35am and luckily it was quiet as we hadn't passed any W.C's for hours and we were both bursting! Feeling much better after that we got our stuff together hearing some noisy **Redpoll** in the trees surrounding the car park. We set off down the track and into a very muddy and steep field, which takes you to the Goose Watchpoint. Surprise, surprise, there wasn't even one goose there to watch so we headed back down to the track, which leads to the Hide where we hoped our next target bird would be. The tree-lined track was much longer than we'd expected but there was no shortage of birds to keep our spirits up. There were plenty of **Siskin** and also **Coal Tit**, **Goldcrest** and **Treecreeper**. I heard a call, which I recognized as **Nuthatch**, (although Wendy didn't believe I could ID a Nuthatch by call.....Ffft!), which we were very pleased to be able to watch for a

while on the path ahead of us before it flew off into the trees. We finally found the Hide and just outside it was a cute **Red Squirrel** who was obviously on to the fact that there were easy pickings to be had at the peanut feeders. We sat down in the Hide, which we had to ourselves, and watched the well-stocked feeders intently hoping that our target bird would show.



This would be another lifer for Wendy but also a good bird for me as I've only seen one once before. A **Great-spotted Woodpecker** flew in to raid the peanuts causing all the smaller birds to scarper pretty sharpish and another Nuthatch was making regular appearances but there was no sign of what we wanted. There were also some **Common Snipe** feeding at the edge of the Loch but unfortunately for us none of them turned out to be a Jack Snipe. By now we'd been joined by another couple of birders who were really nice and friendly but not 'in your face.' Wendy had been guarding the right hand side window as she thought it looked good but she was getting restless so we swapped over seats. No sooner had I sat down in her place than our bird flew in and I called, "**Willow Tit!**" She was slightly annoyed but quickly got over it, had some great views and was happy that already she had her 2nd lifer of the trip :). We managed to get some pics and the other couple told us that they hadn't seen one there for at least 5 years!



After the excitement was over we packed up and headed back to car as we needed to get going again as we still had loads to do. We saw a **Peacock Butterfly**, which we hadn't expected to see so early in the year, **Kestrel** and **Mistle Thrush** and were back at the car by 12.55pm.

As we passed through a nice little village Wendy spotted a Café so I slammed on the brakes and she bailed out to get her 1st coffee fix of the day. While she was in the café I contemplated phoning the Guinness Book of World Records as this was easily her personal record...it was 1.23pm! She emerged looking disappointed, the coffee was tiny but she'd bought a piece of homemade millionaires shortbread for us to share and refuel with. The coffee was gone in seconds but the shortbread took rather a lot longer. I think they must use a traditional Scottish recipe as it tasted like it was made with a pound of butter and a bucket of sugar, Wendy couldn't finish her bit and even I struggled! The sun was now shining so the temperature had risen considerably meaning that Wendy had to go through the rigmarole of changing out of her ski pants and back to normal trousers while parked up on a busy road with a heavily pedestrianized pavement...the joys of travel :P. We saw a **Magpie** over the road and realized that it was the first one of the trip, which seemed odd considering you'd have been lucky to see them in groups of less than 8 at home. Is there less food for them to eat in Scotland due to the large number of Buzzards and Red Kites? We left at 2.35pm for our next planned stop off and target bird.

We arrived at Trabboch at 2.35pm where there'd been a Ring-necked Duck reported regularly but a scan of the area only produced **Coot** and a lovely male **Goosander** on the river. That was our second dip of the day so we had our fingers crossed that the next place was going to be more productive. We didn't hold much hope though as I'd already dipped on these birds 5 times and Wendy

4 AND it was also the one area I'd been dreading visiting all day. This place was set in the middle of two rough looking council estates and it would mean leaving my car and all it's contents parked up unattended :/.

We arrived at Dundonald Camp at 2.58pm and after getting advice from Bird Forum I'd found the place to park up and we could see the shallow pool where our bird should be. It was only a short walk across a grassy wasteland to a field where there were some horses being kept....easy peasy. Stepping out across the grass we soon realized that it was going to be anything but easy, the ground was very boggy under foot and with every step we took up would fly a million midgies! It wasn't pleasant to put it mildly. We were nearly there but the bog was becoming deeper and more midgie infested by the second so Wendy decided to go all Karl Pilkington on me (not just being a massive girl of course). She'd concluded that seeing the bird wasn't worth being eaten alive for and squelched her way back to car spitting out midgies as she went :/. I pressed on, no pain no gain and all that, and was rewarded with my 2nd lifer of the trip, my first **Pectoral Sandpiper** :). I was so lucky that it was on the near edge of the pool but when I saw one of the horses trotting towards it I thought I better attempt some shots quickly. I tried to keep the horse between myself and the bird, using the horse as mobile cover. This worked well and the bird carried on feeding. Even though the light was bad I am pleased with the shot I managed.



Wendy turned round to look back, saw me getting pics and instantly regretted her decision. She had a look at the pool and saw a distant wader shape which wasn't good enough to claim her lifer. She was just about to give it another go when I started walking back. She was gutted but little did she know that I'd seen another easier way in for her to see the bird. We got back in the car and I drove round the estate to the other side where there was a concrete path over a flattened fence leading right up the pool.



If only I'd known this before I got completely covered in mud.....Grrrrrr! Wendy jumped out with her camera, while I sat in the car minding our stuff, and walked straight down the path to the bird, got some pics and skipped back happy to have just seen her 3rd lifer without a midgie in sight :). Time was now ticking and we left at 3.35pm to head to our next location and passed a field where there were a few grazing Roe Deer.

We'd reached RSPB Lochwinnoch by 4.13pm and we were starting to flag by now. I'd hoped we'd be there a lot earlier to avoid rush hour in the middle of Glasgow but by now I realized there was no avoiding it....Erk. I'd read up about Lochwinnoch and it sounded a very interesting reserve. It was a group of large Lochs and Reedbeds, which seemed to attract plenty of decent things including regular Bittern sightings. Going through the Visitor Centre I was accosted by one of the RSPB volunteers who'd noticed my camera. Wendy quickly legged it to the toilets while I got the full Lochwinnoch intro. I'd just wanted to know where the Smew was being seen so we could go straight there but instead got escorted to their new Photographic Hide! Wendy came out from the toilets and gave me a confused look as I walked past her being led away by a young foreign girl! Reluctantly Wendy followed and we had a quick look from the hide. It was nice to see the RSPB putting the effort into providing areas for photographers but unfortunately we didn't have time to give it justice. I went back in and asked about the Smeus. Nobody seemed to know any details so we got a reserve map and just aimed for the nearest few Hides.

We walked out to the first Hide and viewed the Loch, which had all the usual suspects on it and scanned and scanned, for our bird. We saw some **Long-tailed Tits** and heard a squealing **Water Rail** but despite our best efforts we had to accept the fact that we'd just dipped on another lifer, a Smew. We were both gutted, especially as these two were males....Ah well :(I found out later on that they were both seen from the Visitor Centre that day....Arrghhhh! Not having time to hang around, as I still had a 3hour drive ahead of me, we left at 5.10pm. We were hoping we'd get to Aviemore before Tesco closed as we had no food or even milk for drinks but had no idea of its opening hours. We hit Glasgow bang on rush hour and amazingly at the dreaded roundabouts I managed to be in the right lane each time albeit by pure chance. At one point there were 5 lanes and

cars changing lanes all over the place in front of me. I just kept my course and came out the other side....Phew! Nice to experience it but never again!! :)

A few hours later I realized I was running low on fuel so programmed the Sat Nav to find the nearest garage. Wendy was also getting a bit tired and was freaking out about not being able to have a coffee in the morning if Tesco was shut. I suggested we could pick up some essentials at the garage so Wendy went in ahead of me. She wasn't impressed with the poor selection and only managed to get some milk. I crossed my fingers that Tesco would be open or I'd have a very annoyed Wendy on my hands! Exactly 3 hours later we pulled up outside and praise the lord found that it was still open.....big Phew! After a quick essentials shop we left 30minutes later and heaved a sigh of relief when we parked up at 8.50pm outside Spey Cottage which was going to be our H.Q for the week. The place was very clean, it had a cosy looking log burner, the beds were really comfy and there was loads of space so we were happy. After we'd unpacked, had baths and tea, etc we finally sat down to unwind. It had been a very long and busy day so Wendy was keen to phone her Mum just to let her know we'd arrived safely. After trying every room in the house it became apparent that there was no phone.....Aaaarrgghhhhhh!!!!!! How we'd overlooked that when trying to find a cottage I'll never know, but we had. Any contact with home would now have to be at mobile phone prices therefore kept very short and sweet. The temperature in the cottage was controlled by a thermostat, which we couldn't alter and at 11pm it became very cold but it was too late to light the log burner. After a drink and a bit of T.V we were knackered and fell into a freezing cold but very comfy bed.

Saturday 24th March

After a chilly, nights sleep Wendy was up and raring to go at 6.30a.m but looking outside the sky was grey and it looked cold. As we'd arrived in the dark the night before we'd been looking forward to being able to see the garden of our H.Q. We'd been told that there were Red Squirrels and lots of bird life so we were quite excited. In reality however both seemed highly unlikely but it was worth keeping an eye on. It was a lovely garden though with trees at the bottom and the river Spey running behind them.



There were plenty of typical garden birds and Wendy saw a Goosander flying up the river and was also pleasantly surprised to see a single Red Squirrel in the trees at the bottom of the garden. I was up and about shortly after her and when she'd told me about the Squirrel it made me wonder whether we could coax them in nearer to the house with peanuts and get some great pics? I'd also have rig up some kind of feeding station for birds too as the trees were about 40 meters away from the house!

After breakfast and concocting a very basic plan of action we left at 8.24am to revisit our Black Grouse site to see if there was anything happening yet. We saw a **Song Thrush** as we passed Loch Pityoulish and parked up at Tulloch Moor at 8.45am. Things didn't look good as there was no screen up, which meant that the birds hadn't started lekking yet....Urrgghhh! It was deadly quiet so we knocked it on the head and continued on to Loch Garten. At 9.10am we got out of the car in search of our favourite 'little' Scottish specialty, the Crested Tit. It wasn't long before we heard what we were pretty sure were Cresties but all the birds were so high up in the trees we couldn't see any! Normally at this time of year they're feeding lower down making it easier to see and photograph them (one reason we went in March) but with the sun now out and temperatures feeling unusually mild they'd obviously moved higher up. After a few minutes Wendy called, "**Crested Tit!**" I looked up and got it in my bins....Nice :). They didn't hang about for long and soon all was quiet again so we took a spin further up the road to Loch Mallachie. It was still early and there wasn't a breath of wind so the mirror image reflection in the Loch was just beautiful. After Wendy had sat on a rock, taken in enough of the view and had a contemplative hippy moment we headed off for a walk.



We had the place to ourselves and it was soooooo peaceful.....until a coach party group unloaded and nattered their way past us noisily. Wendy found another Crestie way up high again so our chances of getting any pics were getting smaller by the minute. The one thing that Wendy had wanted to go home with was a passable record shot of a Crestie but she knew it wasn't going to be

easy. I too was desperate to get a half decent shot of one too, especially as my shots from last year were so bad. We walked around the loop path and had a look at the **Wood Ant** nest. Amazing things :).



There was nothing else of note though so were back at the car by 11.10am and already knackered, probably the day before catching up with us. Luckily Wendy had made a massive flask of coffee to keep her going for the day so after a quick snack to refuel we left at 11.25am. Not knowing where to go next I had a quick look at the OS map and spotted a path going through the woods behind the reserve. It was somewhere new so 5 minutes later we pulled up at a layby near Loch Garten. We reckoned it was too late in the day but worth a go to try and find one of our two 'most wanted' birds. Even if we just checked out the areas potential it wouldn't be a complete waste of time.



It was now so warm that Wendy had to take her coat and hat off and I had to lose my base layers.....good job it wasn't busy! We came across a **Raven** flying

overhead, some **Crossbills** and Wendy saw a **Shrew** scuttle across the path ahead of us so quickly she couldn't ID it. After an hours walk we were back at the car at 12.28pm and hungry so we went back to the RSPB car park, down the road and parked up near the feeders to eat our lunch. As I was messing around with my camera, aiming for my best ever Chaffinch shot (no Cresties unfortunately) a guy in a 4x4 parked up right between my car and the feeder and proceeded to sit there totally blocking my view! I would have overlooked this if my lens, which was sticking a good way out of the window, hadn't been so huge and obvious but I guess some people may not be observant enough to notice something so blatant.

Seeing as we were having such a good day for Cresties, but had so far failed in getting any shots of them, I thought we could give Boat of Garten a shot. There are feeders there which are regularly used by Cresties and Red Squirrels.....apparently. There are also Slavonian Grebes there too but having seen no reports of any yet we knew that these were going to be some of the many birds we'd come to Scotland too early to see. We arrived at 1.30pm and the area was totally dead. We thought we heard a Crestie but yet again it didn't stick around and we were back to total silence so we decided to go and pay a quick visit to our Dipper location. When we stayed at An Ti Ghur Cottage in May 2011 we'd found a pair of Dippers who were nesting under a bridge just down the road. I'd also managed to get my best ever Dipper shot while it was sitting on its favourite perch in the middle of the river. It would be interesting to see if they were still there so off we went.

At 2pm we walked the short distance down a field towards the bridge over the river. We noticed that there were no Sandmartins back yet then Wendy called, "**Dipper!**" We then watched it land on its favourite perch where it started to sing. Neither of us had ever heard the song of a Dipper before and it was surprisingly sweet and not a bit like we'd ever have imagined. We edged our way closer to it, hiding behind the wooden bridge to get some pics. Wendy even surprised herself by managing to fire off some good shots.



We had to drive past the turning to An Ti Ghur on the way to have a quick look at Loch Vaa, which was another of our Slav Grebe hot spots last year, and we had

our first good view of the Cairngorms. We couldn't believe it.....there was barely any snow left up there and there'd been way more last May! Needless to say there was nothing at the Loch but we thought it could be a good idea to check it again at the end of the week.... well you never know. Having exhausted all our local sites we couldn't resist paying the Cresties we'd found nearby last May another visit.

At 2.40pm we found ourselves in the same predicament as last time. We were driving on the right road but couldn't for the life of us work out where the layby was to park up in. We thought we'd found it but as we walked down the track we recognized nothing, it was the wrong place...Grrrr! I drove a bit further down the road and luckily we spotted a familiar looking spot and pulled up. With our batteries now running low Wendy had a quick coffee fix before we headed off. This was more like it, we were definitely in the right place and it wasn't long before we'd seen our first Crestie :). Typically they were again high up in the trees, flitting about at the speed of light. We tried getting some pics but failed again big time. This was Wendy's first ever attempt at getting shots of such a difficult bird and ended up slumped on the ground saying that she would never be able to do it. Everything went quiet again so we cleared off back to car depressed. On the way back we called in to Rothiemurchus Fish Farm to buy a feeder and some peanuts for the garden.

Having decided that morning to not set our sights too high or attempt anything too ambitious, so we could recover before hammering the place, we called it a day. We had to stop off at Tesco again to get some edibles in for tea anyway as our rushed and bleary eyed effort the night before had resulted in bare essentials only. After that we retired to H.Q for tea and a chill out. While Wendy was relaxing in the bath I took myself down to the river to find a suitable branch to hang the peanut feeder on and set it up outside the living room window (with an amazing bit of DIY skills using naturally found items!). Now it would just be a case of waiting to see what would use it. This was the view of the cottage looking back from the trees.



We'd been looking forward to chilling out with the log burner blasting out some heat but when I tried to fire it up with the wood in the cottage it just wouldn't

light. I gave up in the end and tried to think of another tactic for the following night. Later on as it was getting dark Wendy spotted something zoom past the window outside so went to check it out. She came running back in shortly after squealing, "**Bats!**" Cool :). While we were packing for the trip Wendy had suggested bringing her Bat Detector Box which ID's them by making their calls audible but I didn't think for one minute that they'd be about this early in the year so we didn't bother....Doh!

Even though it had been a relatively uneventful day we'd already filled our boots with Cresties and seen our first bats of the year :). We had a more strenuous day ahead of us so to ensure a better nights sleep Wendy brought in a 2nd feather quilt from another bedroom which combined with the memory foam mattress did the job perfectly :P.

Sunday 25th March

We were up at 7am and with the clocks going forward at 2am it was darker than it had been but on the upside it also meant no stupidly early morning starts for a change. It was another cold, grey start but it wasn't long before the sun was shining :). We left H.Q at 8.49am and our first plan was try Tulloch Moor for Black Grouse.

We were there by 9.06am and it was deadly quiet with no sign of anything never mind Black Grouse so we gave up at 9.12am hoping we'd have more luck at a new location at Tomintoul. It was already a very comfortable 11C so things were looking good. Driving along a narrow road through the Scots Pine forest I recognized it as being the junction where we'd seen and I'd failed to get pics of Crossbills drinking from a puddle in the road last May. I commented on this and as we turned the next corner we saw a bird in the road. We both shrieked, "**Crossbill!**" and laughed. It was the exact same spot as we'd seen them last year so I pulled over to see if would come back so I could have a second chance of a great shot. We waited and waited but the bird never reappeared so I filled up the puddle with water, as it was nearly dry from all the good weather, before we left.

The road to Tomintoul is narrow and surrounded with heathland so we weren't at all surprised to already be in **Red Grouse** country. They were everywhere we looked and calling too, so we tried for some pics. Further down the road there was one sitting out in the open, just next to the roadside so I slowly edged the car closer to it. We were pretty chuffed that it stuck around and also posed nicely for us enabling us to get some pretty good shots. Happy with that we carried on and drove straight past the field where I'd found out the Black Grouse were meant to be! I needed to turn round and luckily on the left was a sign for a Forestry Board picnic site. Handy! It looked like an interesting area so I switched the engine off and wound the windows down for a bit of break so Wendy grabbed the opportunity for a coffee break. While we sat listening we heard something, which sounded very much like a Black Grouse! We got out of the car and had a wander around which resulted in nothing but it made us hopeful that they were in the vicinity. We didn't have time to hang about so headed off back up the track and past a house which had several **Bullfinch** feeding away merrily in the front garden. Having not expected to see these birds we stopped off to watch them and try to get some pics. The clock was ticking and we still had to get to our main site of the day so we continued onwards and stopped beside a likely looking field. After an initial scan our first impressions were that it was a waste of time but after giving it a few minutes Wendy (eagle eyes) spotted a bird flying across the top of the field miles away and said, "**Black Grouse!**" It turned out to be the first of many of these birds we saw flapping around the fields and

although they were distant views it was great to see them like this rather than gathered at a lek site. We drove away happy with what we'd seen.

At 12pm we arrived at the car park of our main site of the day, Ben Rhinnes, where I'd not only found out we could find Ptarmigan but that it was an easier walk than up Cairngorm too...happy days. Looking at the walk ahead of us Wendy wasn't convinced as although the first stretch of the path looked fine the final climb to the top zig-zagged its way up the steepest mountain we'd ever encountered :/.



Undeterred we set off deciding to travel light without rucksacks and massive lenses to carry. I chanced going without a coat and took just the 300mm lens. The path was stony and not easy under foot so we could only hope that it improved further on. We soon realized that we were totally overdressed as the sun was beating down on us and the temperature began to soar. Half way up Wendy had to check that the coast was clear before taking off her base layers which had to be tied round her waist (although she first attempted the Laurence of Arabia look) as she'd now regrettably left her rucksack in the car.....Doh! By the time we'd done the easy part we were already knackered but we weren't going to give up and ruin our chance of seeing one of our 2 'biggies'.....Oh no! Onwards and upwards we went, passing the happy looking people who were on the decline, wishing it was us! Wendy was starting to feel the strain, as was I, so I tried to be encouraging. This went down like a lead balloon and she decided to throw another of her Karl Pilkington style strops. "I know you wanted to join the army but don't inflict it on me Sergeant Major!" "We're not here on boot camp, we're supposed to be on holiday!" I had to laugh, as it was actually the R.A.F that I wanted to join. I then spotted a dark Grouse like shape and for a second I thought, "Woo Hoo!" but disappointingly it was just another Red Grouse. As we climbed higher we started to find poo and white feathers which could only mean one thing.....Ptarmigan! OMG they were around somewhere and the higher we climbed the more frequently we found feathers. I'd been tracking our walk on my motionX gps app and found that the feathers started at around 2600ft. We finally reached the top (2800ft) at 2.50pm but still hadn't seen much apart from a few **Meadow Pipits** and the Red Grouse, so felt slightly discouraged not to mention distinctly cold.



Strangely, even though it was boiling with no wind at the bottom, at the top it was nearing a gale force wind and freezing....weird. I had to admit that I didn't remember Cairngorm being as hard to walk up! I took a wander across the top of the mountain and Wendy spotted a distant shape, which looked good. Meanwhile she was sheltering from the freezing wind and trying to put her base layers back on with numb fingers. We both ended up walking nearer to what we hoped was our bird and were passed by a guy, well into his 50's, wearing jeans, a blue shirt and normal (no treads) lace up shoes :O. He was off and over the top before we could say, "What the....?" Ok! He managed to flush some more Red Grouse from the other side of the mountain but nothing else and as we approached our bird shape it was ID'd as a rock :(There were so many white feathers and scrapes in the ground containing loads of poo but unbelievably a total lack of birds.



Even walking the extra distance produced nothing so we gave up and finally gave in to start our descent. We'd been looking forward to this moment for ages but in reality it was possibly worse! It was so steep and the ground so uneven that it wasn't long before 'jelly legs' kicked in. 'Superman walker in normal clothes' soon caught up and overtook us, having no doubt climbed several other peaks further on, and disappeared up ahead. As if that wasn't bad enough we could hear someone else coming up behind us and were soon passed by a woman (older than Superman) wielding poles and all the hiking gear. She seemed determined to show us what a pro hiker she was but we couldn't help but brake out into a giggle when she stumbled on some loose rocks and nearly took a decking. We'd just been burned off by 2 people, much older than us, but at least we were still standing up without crutches! As we got further down the wind died away and the heat hit us again we couldn't believe how hot it was for anywhere in the UK in March never mind so high up in Scotland!

We were finally back at the car at 3.50pm and as we sat down we noticed that our feet were throbbing from our walk. We had walked 6.17 miles, climbed 2051 foot and it had taken us 3 hours 40 minutes (with a lot of stopping to look). I'd guessed the temperature was about 25C so when I turned the car on I was shocked to see 29C!! It was March... in Scotland! Global warming or what! So it was off with the base layers again and windows down before we ate our well earned lunch. Looking back at what we'd just done it looked far harder than we'd first thought and we vowed to stick with Cairngorm from then on. Ben Rhinnes is 2,800ft and we'd just done a 1,800ft climb in blazing sun so our brains were fried and we looked decidedly sun burned! It was well worth it though to have had the experience and seen the views but we made the unanimous decision to leave Findhorn for another day. It was only 1/2hr away but also 1/2hr from H.Q so we thought maybe we should just head home and relax.

We arrived back at H.Q at 5.15pm and went straight to the feeder to see if we'd managed to attract anything in. We were pleasantly surprised to find Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Coal Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit and House Sparrow all feeding away happily. Would it work with the Squirrel though? Having been unsuccessful with the log burner the night before I was too tired to even bother trying. We needed an early night anyway and went to bed before the thermostat clicked off.

Monday 26th March

The nutters we are we'd set the alarm for 5.30am for an early start to try again for our 'most wanted' bird. Fortunately we woke up before it went off feeling strangely awake, considering the massive walk we'd endured the day before. As it was still dark we felt optimistic, which is very unusual for us, that we could get out to the site early enough to make the trip successful. It was a really cold 2C and misty but it was obviously going to be another belter of a day so after dressing for the arctic we set off at 6.50am with the plan of stopping off at HQ to change into warmer weather gear on the way to our second planned stop.

Passing Tulloch Moor, which was shrouded in thick mist making visibility poor, we saw the first birders we'd seen there since arriving. The temperature in the car was now reading -2C and luckily we'd already seen Black Grouse so didn't need to get out into the freezing cold to try and spot a black blob amongst the pea soup so headed off for our first site. On the way we stopped to watch a Doe **Roe Deer** with her 2 fawns.

We arrived at Forest Lodge at 7.22am and there was nobody around so it looked like the area had so far been undisturbed. We'd tried this site last May and not

only had it been nearly impossible to find but we'd also failed to see what we wanted. During my research I'd seen Forest Lodge mentioned so after checking the maps I decided to try again but to do the northern circuit path this time instead of the southern. I'd also read that in April the path would be closed to prevent disturbance so that just said to me that there must be some birds living in the forest somewhere. It was a big gamble to put our early morning effort into there rather than Grantown woods which seems to be the main place people look for these birds. The temperature was now -1C and it certainly felt like it but we weren't going to let that put us off. We started to walk down the track and from what we could see it looked perfect.



We had the forest to ourselves again so hopefully we'd be the first to disturb anything.....if there was anything to disturb! It was so quiet and we couldn't see or hear a single bird, it appeared lifeless :(. We passed an open area, which looked really good for a possible lekking site in a few weeks time but there were no signs of any activity and the depression soon crept in. Even though we were in base layers, hats, gloves, etc, our fingers were aching with the cold and we were starting to give up hope. I started to take pictures of any poo out of sheer desperation but on looking back I think I probably now have a dog poo gallery! :/. Luckily it was a loop walk and as we were on the last section before getting to the car Wendy very casually said, "Large bird flying through the trees." I instantly went into Defcom 5 mode and got the bins up in a flash, Wendy then shrieked, "It's one it's one!" Luckily the bird had carried on its flight path and reappeared from behind the ridge and plonked itself down on the other side of the path to reveal itself as a very impressive male **Capercaillie**.....O! We couldn't believe what we seeing, one of our 2 'most wanteds' was sitting to our left half buried amongst the Billberry carpet and our jaws hit the floor. I instantly raised my camera and grabbed a quick record shot which isn't bad

considering the total panic of such an unbelievable moment :). I chimped straight away and saw that the 5 shots I'd fired off were at 1/60th of a second.....Uh oh. Luckily I had pre-prepped my camera settings so was delighted to find that one shot was recognizable even though the bird was a long way off.



This was my 3rd lifer and 4th for Wendy and a moment definitely worthy of a high 5 (even by Wendy's standards) and a Caper dance....well it had to be done :P.

He didn't hang about and soon flew back across the path and deep into the forest he'd appeared from.....fantastic! In a few days the path would be closing for their breeding season so we were unbelievably lucky to have seen it and going about its business in its natural environment too. Totally awestruck we continued the short walk back to the car when I smelt something and said, "What's that smell?" Wendy replied, "Barbeque?" to which I said, "Dunno, but whatever it is it smells nice....mmmm." We were then hit by the overpowering smell of rotting corpse, which stuck to the back of our throats and made us feel quite sick. Wendy was in stitches at the idea of me thinking it was nice but then decided she was actually worried about me :/. We could only think that it was a dead Deer in the forest and fortunately, as far as we know, there were no reports of a missing person on the news :P. Back at the car it was now 9.47am, 2C and sunny so, still in disbelief, we went back to H.Q to get changed out of our arctic clothes and set off at 10.30am for our next site of the day.

We arrived in Findhorn at 11.30am and rather than stay by the car we thought we'd have a walk up some of the 8 miles of valley to give us a better chance of finding our bird. The views in this valley are some of our favourite and we could have just sat there all day taking it all in.



We had a quick snack and Wendy topped up her caffeine levels outside on the grass admiring the view and soaking up the sun. It wasn't long after starting the walk before we'd spotted a **Peregrine**, which landed on a ledge high up on the rocky cliff face and up on the tops were the local **Red Deer** and **Goats**. We also saw **Common Gull** and **Brown Hare** and it was so warm by then that Wendy had to take her coat off and I was wearing just my T-shirt! We walked quite a way but hadn't seen what we were after so headed back to the car as last year we'd actually seen it on the way out of the valley.



We were heading back down the road by 1.30pm and beginning to lose hope when Wendy (eagle eyes again!) spotted a bird in the thermals way up over the mountaintops. We'd seen a couple of Buzzards earlier but this bird stood out to her as being BIG even at that distance. After an agonizing 30 seconds of being 99% sure just on size alone, we finally saw it bank over to reveal the white wing

patches! At the last minute we'd finally seen a **Golden Eagle** so we parked up and watched it pass over and vanish into the distance....Nice :).

After that we added another location into the day and decided to pay Lochindorb a visit. We arrived at 2.34pm by which time the temperature was reading 24C! The Loch itself was dead but there were more Red Grouse in the heath. We just wished we could see these birds as easily at home as it seemed as though everywhere there's moorland in Scotland there's Red Grouse. One was right by the side of the road and we had the sun behind us so we both filled our boots with pics. In my opinion Wendy got the best shot.



After the bird moved off and we'd goofed up getting a shot of a female, we made a move, stopping off at Loch Vaa on our way after Wendy spotted 2x **Little Grebes** from the road.

We were home by 4.30pm and went to check out the feeder and ok it wasn't a Squirrel but we added Dunnock and Robin to our garden list :). After tea and baths we were glad we'd come home early, as we were soooooo tired. We definitely needed to chill out before the heavy day ahead of us so after the log burner defeated me again I put my feet up...Grrrrrrr. Later on I went outside to try and get some video of the bats and I heard the unmistakable squeak and then saw a **Woodcock** fly over the garden. I shouted for Wendy to come out but unfortunately it had gone by the time she got there.

Tuesday 27th March

Wendy was up at the crazy time of 5.58am and I finally surfaced at 7am. It was another cold start to the day but again promising to be another warm one later. Our plan was to give the Cairngorms walk a go for our last attempt at Ptarmigan. If we failed again then we'd have to give up, as apart from Ben Rhinnes we knew of nowhere better and also I didn't think we had it in us to do another monster

climb in a week. We were still feeling the after effects from our huge and unsuccessful walk on Sunday but we weren't going to let that put us off. We'd already seen one of our 'biggies' and our instincts were telling us that there was NO WAY we'd be ending our holiday with both 'in the bag' and we'd be returning home with more unfinished business! After breakfast and my daily dose of CBeebies (Postman Pat is class!) we left at 8.30am feeling less than optimistic. We popped in to see our favorite Cresties on the way and it was 2C and cold so we'd had to dress accordingly. We passed Lochmorlich and just couldn't resist stopping for some pics.



We arrived at the car park of monster mountain at 9.30am and looking at the path we were about to walk it definitely didn't look half as bad as Ben Rhinnes so it felt doable.



Even so I thought that taking my massively heavy lens up would be a bad move so stuck with the Wendy's lighter option of the 300mm but if things went to plan

this could be a problem. I'd been told to go into the Rangers Office to ask if there had been any recent sightings, which I duly did, and was told by the very helpful Ranger dude where they'd been seen the day before. Luckily it wasn't from the path we were planning on going up, which was the one we did last May, so it would be a new area to explore. This was encouraging and we trotted off up the path, which became a lot steeper the higher we walked. By now Wendy was stripping off again (was she a stripper in a previous life? :P). The sun was yet again beating down on us and we were beginning to wonder what month it was as it really didn't feel like March. We just couldn't believe the good luck we were having with the weather, sun and warmth instead of the rain/snow and cold that we'd expected. As we huffed, puffed and sweated our way up, we'd gone past the 2900ft mark (that I read Ptarmigan like) and something caught my eye at the side of the path.....**Ptarmigan x2!!!!!!!!!!** I was so amazed I took a big breath in and got an instant sharp pain in my chest. Uh Oh....not a good time or place to be having a heart attack! This was my 4th lifer and Wendy's 5th :O. They were about 20ft away from the footpath and although I knew that they were supposedly very approachable I really wasn't prepared for just how approachable.



I raised the camera and frantically tried to get some shots while Wendy stood there watching. It wasn't long before I could hear, "Give us a go you @**£!" I'd slithered my way closer to the birds while she was still down on the path, not wanting to flush the birds, as I could possibly never have an opportunity like it again. While I was engrossed she was having another one of her hippy moments and sitting soaking up the sun, texting her Mum and telling some random guy who'd stopped for a chat with her that she just wanted to stop time and stay there forever. She soon snapped out of it and carrying her rucksack, my fleece, my bins, her bins and coat all on her back she crept her way up to where I was. Unbelievably the birds weren't fazed by human tortoise and stayed put! Yet again Wendy got the better pic.....Grrrrr :).



They were a pair and we could hear them chattering to each other as they fed on the heather quite calmly in front of us. When we were happy with our pics we decided to leave them to it and bundled up our stuff and continued up to the top, where we'd been told to look by the Rangers. We could've turned round and gone back to car at that point as we'd been soooooo lucky to have found them where we had but....once you start something you have to finish. Up at the top Wendy scanned the Corrie and found a few more birds sitting on ledges and flying around chasing each other....Cool.



These views were distant though and had they been our only ones we certainly wouldn't have left as happy with what we'd seen. As we were feeling so good we

carried on to check out the views of Ben Macdui, the 2nd highest mountain in the UK, from the other side and they were breathtaking.



I could've happily carried on all day and 'bagged' Ben Macdui, but we had to settle for just one Munro at 3591ft and headed back down at 1pm feeling very pleased with ourselves. Back at the car at 2pm looking back on our experience I only wished that I'd taken my camera up as well so we could've both taken pics but we'll know for next time :P.

Wendy's first priority was to go to the Café for a Cappuccino fix and we had our lunch in the car, which felt like a sauna, as it was 20C. We checked out our injuries (we suffer for our art :P) and I had a few grazes but Wendy's hands were covered in splinters from crawling through the dry and spikey ground cover on the mountain. It took her ages to get them all out! I also found out that our walk had been 5.7miles, which was 1mile less than Ben Rhinnes and a lot easier. We'd started at 2000ft and climbed to 3591ft and it had been totally worth the effort.

We popped in for a second look of the day for our Cresties at 2.55pm but they were still nowhere to be seen so decided that we both deserved a well earned treat. We pulled up at 'The Potting Shed' at Inchriach Nurseries at 3.20pm ready for a slice of their amazing cake. We both opted for the tried and tested chocolate cake and sat down by the long window at the back of the Café, which overlooks the feeders. We'd hoped that the Red Squirrels would be there like on our previous visits but all we saw was a thousand Chaffinches! The cake was definitely just as good as we remembered it to be but the conversation between the other customers left a lot to be desired. It had been taken over by a bloke, who Wendy thought was a woman, giving a lecture in Twitchers V Birders and even his lady 'friend' looked bored sensesless.....Haha. From the Café we went home via Loch An Eileen, saw nothing and were home by 4.30pm. As I was parking up Wendy spotted a bird over the river, which at first glances she thought looked like a very dark gull. We both got our bins on it and to our total surprise it was an **Osprey**! We really thought it would be too early for them to be back, which was one of our regrets for having booked our holiday so early. We'd have to keep our eyes peeled for any more from then on.

When at last we sat down to chill out, after I'd failed to light the stupid log burner AGAIN, we discovered that we had a dilemma on our hands. As we had seen our 2 Highland targets already what would we do for the remaining days? For the next days plan would we head west to Skye to try for White-tailed Eagle and possibly Otter or east for the long staying Greater Yellowlegs and some other birds we could pick up on the way? If we went to Skye it would take about 2 1/2hrs and we would risk seeing nothing but if we went east it would take 2hrs but we could still end up seeing nothing.....Urrghhhh! We decided to sleep on it as we were in no fit state to make any decisions and went to bed.

Wednesday 28th March

We were up and about at 7am and it was another lovely day although it was obviously windier and feeling colder than it had been all week. Wendy was pleased that she wasn't still up Cairngorm (like she'd wished) as the weather was set to change at the weekend to what it should be.....snow and freezing temperatures! We were still undecided as to what to do for the day but finally made the decision to go for the Greater Yellowlegs as it was probably our only chance of ever seeing one and definitely a bird not to miss. We packed the car up and set off at 9am by which time it was already 9.5C.

By 10.20am we had hit the NE coast and had our first view of the sea. We could see that some of the seaside towns would be worth stopping off at for a look at what was out there. I quickly checked the phone for any news on the Greater Yellowlegs but realized that yet again I had no 3g reception even though the bars were full.....Eh? We passed a sign for a town called 'Slackhead' (Hahaha) and further down the road a lorry driver flashed me. I had no idea why but then I noticed a speed cam van parked up ahead of us so, "Thanks for that Mr lorry driver." We stopped off at Cullen and saw **Red-throated Diver, Guillemot and Eider.**



We were in Banff by 10.51am where we picked up **Gannet, Rock Pipit, Shag, Razorbill** and just as I mentioned it might be a good place for Sea Ducks, 5 x **Long-tailed Duck** popped up into view....cool :). There were also 3x waders, miles out at the tide line, which had to be **Bar-tailed Godwit**. We were in

Fraserburgh by 11.39am and picked up some **Kittiwake** but were very relieved to be nearing our destination.

Finally, at 12.04pm, we parked up at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg car park, which was slightly odd as it was just an old barn on what looked like someone's farm. In the bushes were loads of **Tree Sparrows**, which are always nice to see. There were toilets (first port of call for us both) and a Visitors Centre so while Wendy was in the W.C I popped in to ask about the bird. There was an elderly lady sitting at the viewing window next to a scope who was very nice and helpful showing me exactly where the bird was. I was shocked to find that it was viewable from the window even if it was on the furthest pool. I had a quick look through the scope and went outside to tell Wendy who was equally as stunned. She also had a look through the scope taking in its erratic, animated behavior and bright yellow legs. It was a pretty cool bird alright and one which would definitely stand out down at Stinky Dubh.....dream on :P. We were both very pleased to have seen **Greater Yellowlegs**, which was my 5th lifer and Wendy's 6th. The lady told us that it was the closest it had been showing for the past week so, unbelievably, luck was on our side again. Although 'close' actually meant about 500 yards away!



I put on all my teleconverters and grabbed an extremely distance record shot and some video through the window. As we'd travelled all that way we decided we might as well have a look round the rest of the reserve. We'd envisaged having to put at least some time and effort in before seeing what we'd gone there for.....not that we were complaining! We walked out to the Tower Pool Hide, which felt like miles, and added nothing but **Black-tailed Godwit** to our list.



There was an interesting and large looking bird sitting on a distant post, which was too far away to ID so we hoped we could get nearer to it when we moved to the other hides....if it didn't fly first. The weather had been unbelievably warm since we'd arrived so the drop in temperature and stronger wind was a big shock to our systems. The list of birds regularly seen there was pretty impressive (including Smew!) but maybe our luck had just run out. We called it a day and went back to the car for our lunch where I was pleased to discover that you could drive to the other Hides so that was to be our next plan.

Normally when you visit an RSPB Reserve you enter via a well signed track, into a car park, through a Visitors Centre and out into the grounds...easy peasy. This place was much different, very disjointed and confusing. Following my Sat Nav we found ourselves driving down an old disused Airfield, with an obvious M.O.D presence. The road had been blocked off with massive obstacles, leaving just enough space for a car, which presumably was intended to stop boy racers from using it as a racetrack?



I later found out that it was an ex Royal Navy air station called Crimold Airfield which now looks like some sort of Military listening station. I found it amazing to think that they would give public access to this place when we can't even get access to a defunct gravel pit back at home.....Grrrrr! Whatever it was, or is, it certainly wasn't picturesque and we had to remind ourselves why we'd ended up there when we had such beautiful scenery right on our doorstep. I parked up at 2.11pm and we took a wander out to the Fen Hide and sat down for a look.



It too was pretty dead but there was another Little Grebe, 3x **Goosander** and a **Hen Harrier** floated past. We had a quick look in the sightings book and couldn't believe that we'd just missed (by 20 minutes) a Bittern flying across the gap in front of the hide and a Mink swimming outside it too.....Arrghhhh! Having

seen just about all there was and realizing that the bird on the post wasn't in our view we moved further on to the Bay Hide.

This one looked better but we were starting to flag and I still had to drive us back to Aviemore so we hoped it would be worth sticking it out for a bit longer. The bird on the post was disappointingly just another Buzzard and not the Short-eared Owl we were hoping for.....but that's optimism for you ;). Looking out over the water, which was actually quite rough, we counted a total of 7x **Red-breasted Mergansers** and a single **Great-crested Grebe**. Wendy noticed a couple of Pigeons land on the bank, which turned out to be 2x **Stock Dove**. As we could see nothing else of note and were feeling decidedly worse for wear and cold we both agreed that it was time to leave. Back at the car at 3.30pm I whacked on the heated seats and heating and we soon thawed out as we drove towards our last stop of the day. As we left we had to get a photo for our 'Dumps of the Mainland' album (to go with Hunstanton and Snettisham!).



There were some interesting Dunes on the coast at Rattray so I thought they'd be worth a check as it looked like you could view the sea from there. The track leading to the dunes was probably the roughest I've ever driven on, my poor car! After about 10mins of total car abuse we hit the end of the line next to an old lighthouse with outbuildings, which had been turned into guest accommodation. There was no way we were going to be able to view the sea unless we got out of the car and walked but we just couldn't rustle up the energy or enthusiasm to do so. The surrounding fields were caked in Pink Feet and Curlew, which was different from the Barnacle Geese we'd become so used to. I turned the car round and back tracked up the track I wished I'd never driven down. It was now 4pm and time was getting on so we headed out for our journey back to Aviemore.



We passed the sign for 'Slackhead' again as well as 'Gash' and 'Spreader Hill' which gave us a giggle but there was nowhere to pull over at any of them to get a pic :P.

We eventually arrived back in Aviemore at 6.30pm and as it had been a long day we thought we'd spare ourselves the hassle and eat out. We popped in to 'La Taverna' the Italian we'd eaten at last year, as we knew it would be nice. Wendy ordered a very nice authentic stone baked Pizza and I stupidly got Spag Bol for a change. Looking at hers I instantly regretted my decision and although mine was nice when we'd finished I still had a Pizza shaped hole in my stomach.

We were back at H.Q by 7.35pm, which was later than we'd thought, and while Wendy was soaking in the bath I tried for the last time to get the log burner going. The house had been quite cold later at night anyway so with the warm weather over it was only going to get worse. I finally, after days of trying, got a fire going and sat back to relax.....and watched as it slowly but surely fizzled out :(That was it, I didn't know what else to try, so I gave up.....for good! I also noticed while I was on wifi at the cottage that I'd received loads of bird alerts, which should have come through earlier while we were out, on 3g. I was starting to think 02s 3g was not all it was cracked up to be.

We were pretty chuffed to have seen the Greater Yellowlegs and within 30secs of arriving too...it just doesn't happen to us! Also if anyone would've told me I'd have seen a Greater before a Lesser Yellowlegs I wouldn't have believed them. There have been 252 Lesser Yellowlegs reported in the UK up to 2007 compared to only 20 Greater....jammy or what?

That evening I decided to go out and see if anything would appear at the Loch Garten feeders and on the way I stopped off at Loch Pityoulish. This time there was a lot of gulls roosting and amongst them I found one of the **Iceland Gulls** which had been reported in the area recently.....Cool. At the feeders though it was completely dead so I came home empty handed photo wise.

Thursday 29th March

Wendy was up at 6.50am shortly followed by me. It was very grey outside with spots of rain but as this was better than what we'd expected for our entire week in Scotland we didn't mind too much. The only problem was that although we'd bagged our 2 'biggies' by getting up close and personal with the pair of Ptarmigan and our brief encounter with the Caper there was something missing. Both of us, but Wendy especially, had wanted to go home with a half decent piccie of a Crestie and so far we'd failed miserably. We would have to hope that the weather improved and make it our mission of the day, as it was our last full day in Scotland :/. After breakfast and a bit more Postman Pat we loaded up the car and set off at 8.30am hoping to get some better Red Squirrel pics nearby on the way to our new Crestie location. It was 9C so we were still hoping that the bad weather would hold off until we'd left.

Boat of Garten is a great place to see Red Squirrels as they have put up peanut feeders for them on the edge of the forest. At 8.40am we parked up and walked the short distance down the footpath to where they were. There was a squirrel on the ground so we started taking pics but being so hyperactive it soon bounced off into the trees. Not long after a 2nd came in but shot straight up the tree becoming obscured by the branches. It was very dark in the trees but we were able to get some ok shots of this one before its stomach took over and it quickly jumped onto the feeder.....Urrghhhh.



Happily feeding away, with no sign of leaving its free buffet breakfast we decided to admit defeat.

We arrived at Anagach Woods at 9.23am and headed off down the track to what would be our final place for the chance of any Crestie pics. The woods looked perfect so we followed the footpath through the trees and found our first Cresties.....way up high in the canopy! We sat down waiting to see if they'd come down any lower and tried to get some pics but it was impossible as they were too high up and quick so we gave up. Further round the path I had a call of nature but as I was dealing with that I heard Wendy call out, "Crestie!" Dohhh! Luckily the bird hung around and we got some shots, as it was quite low down. The shots weren't that good though as it was too dark in the forest and definitely

not what we'd hoped for. On the way back to the car we saw some Roe Deer and then heard some Cresties nearby. We never seem to struggle to find Cresties, which seems to be the opposite of other birders we talked to in the Highlands..... Skillzzz :P. This was an area of younger, smaller trees and as we were on top of a mound they were at eye level.



All of a sudden we heard a Crestie right in front of us, it was just a case of waiting to see if it would come out into the open. Patience paid off and it did so we finally had a chance to get pics. The bird was super quick but performed well even landing on top a tree for a split second. It was a moment of blind panic and as I fired the shutter I said to Wendy, "Did you get it, did you get it?" The bird flew off and I turned to look at her but her face said it all. She'd totally panicked and missed it.....Noooooooooooo! She was absolutely gutted and cursed herself the whole way back to the car. It didn't make her feel any better that I had a Crestie shot which I was extremely happy with! :).



At 11.38am we were back at the car park and Wendy was feeling pretty depressed having made such a mess of a perfect and 'one off' opportunity. She sat down on the ground and wrote some expletives in the dirt with a stick and banged her head in her hands.....not good! We ate our lunch and had to decide what to do next. Would Wendy admit defeat and decide to leave or go back in for round 2? Unanimously we decided to give it another shot in order to try and recover Wendy's day.

At 12.10am we retraced our steps back down the path and over to the mound with the small trees. It was totally dead and no sign of any birds at all. We went all the way back to the place we'd tried first and it too was dead. We waited again and it wasn't long before they were back...Phew! We watched them for ages and noticed that one of them had a favourite perch, which was perfect for pics. The birds flitted about all over the place choosing to land only briefly but just long enough to fire the shutter. We then noticed one of them disappear into a hole in the tree only to reappear bringing something out with it. It looked like we'd found another nest site and they were busy tidying up ready to try again this year! The male bird flew in and offered up a small green caterpillar, which the female duly ate and with this kind of behavior going on we thought it was probably best to leave them alone. We were very surprised though how both of the nest sites we'd found had been so close to heavily used footpaths, we'd imagined such tiny, shy birds would choose somewhere hidden away and discrete. They weren't at all bothered by our presence and we packed up very happy indeed.

Wendy certainly wasn't looking for a photo of National Geographic standards just something better than a blurred blob and it looked like she'd managed to get one even though she'd missed the best opportunity :). I was pretty chuffed to have got a much better shot, than my effort last May, of the bird which landed on top of the tree. We drove away at 2.05pm knowing that it would be last time we'd be able to see Cresties again on this trip but with memories to last a lifetime.

Feeling slightly worse for wear and sorry that that we were leaving the next day we called in at The Heather Centre in Nethybridge to get some pressies to take home. After Wendy had bought half the shop we couldn't resist paying the 'Cloutie Dumpling Restaurant' another visit. We were starving and a snack would be just what the doctor ordered so I decided on a sausage bap. I don't know why but when it arrived I was shocked to find 2 slices of 'square sausage' in it. Even though we were in Scotland I'd still imagined getting normal sausages....Doh! Warily I tried it and I have to say that it was probably the best sausage bap I've even eaten....om nom nom :). After that I thought I'd better get some petrol before the big drive back to Heysham

We left at 3pm and decided to take it easy for the rest of the day as the following day was going to be another huge one so I pulled in to the layby at Loch Vaa. We took a wander down to the very scenic Loch and took in the view.



We'd hate to think how many midgies would be there a bit later in the season. There were 2 x pairs of Little Grebes there and although we'd really hoped to have just caught the returning Slav Grebes before we left there was still no sign of any. Driving through Aviemore we popped into Tesco for some edibles for tea and then, as if we hadn't already filled our boots with them, we thought we'd pay our local Cresties a last visit. While Wendy was doing the shopping I went to the petrol station to fill up. I hadn't really thought that the 'Tough Scots' would have fallen for the 'Southern Wussies' Petrol buying panic but as I arrived I realized I was VERY wrong. All the pumps were taken and more cars waiting so I just squeezed my car behind a van on the forecourt. On the far side of the road was another van that couldn't get in and was holding up all the traffic. The next thing, I heard someone beeping and the (skin headed, tattooed) man in the van in front of me turned round and started mouthing expletives at me and shaking his fist!! I responded with a 'don't ask me' shoulder shrug and pointed at the van on the road! Hahaha, the skinhead bloke then continued his tirade at them! :D. When we eventually got to the pumps Mr Skinhead apologized profously for accusing me and I just about managed to squeak, "It's ok."

Needless to say that when we went to the Crestie site they weren't there so we called it a day and headed back to H.Q to start packing up. We were back at 4pm and set about winding up our stay at Spey Cottage. After tea and while Wendy

was in the bath I took myself out down to the river for the last time. I was glad I brought my camera as there were 2 x Osprey fishing over the fish farm lake which I was able to get some pics of. They were a bit far off but you can't help yourself when there's Ospreys about! :)



At one point one of the birds caught a huge trout and circled higher and higher with it then glided off towards Loch Garten. If only it had come close enough to get a pic! Whilst I was taking pics a bloke with bins appeared on the river path. I got chatting to him and apart from finding out he hadn't seen Cresties all week he mentioned that he'd been getting good photos of Osprey catching fish down the road. Arrghhhh! If only we had found that info out earlier in the week I could have been going down there in the evenings.....Doh. Never mind we could always pop in there on the way out tomorrow.

After her bath Wendy went out and sat on the decking and watched one of the Ospreys still out fishing.....unbelievable stuff from your back garden! We both sat and looked longingly at the log burner imagining how nice it could've been. I've never had any problems lighting one before so we decided that it must've been rubbish anyway :). We were just glad that we weren't going to be around the following week as it was forecasting snow and the temperatures were set to plummet to -2C....Brrrrrrr!

Friday 30th March

We'd set the alarm for 7am so that we could pack up and get going. The day before we'd been told we could stay at the cottage until 2pm but we had too much to cram in and needed to be heading out of Scotland as soon as possible. It was a sunny day but cloudy and at 8.49am after loading up the car we said, "Bye Bye" to Spey Cottage and drove away :(Hoping the Red Squirrels would be coaxed in with our remaining peanuts we went straight to Loch Garten arriving at 9.10am. They were there alright.....super glued to the feeders, stuffing their faces.



We were happy enough with the pics we already had so I filled up their feeders with the nuts, as a thank you pressie, and we said, "Bye Bye." to them too :{.

Next stop was Loch Insh for the Osprey and hopefully we'd finally see one diving in. We'd not expected any Ospreys to be back, as we thought we were way too early, so we should've been happy with seeing them. We parked up in the car park at 9.53am and walked through the Grave Yard to view the Loch. The Osprey was flying round with a fish, which meant that yet again we'd just missed witnessing one actually catching it! This was the female bird and she landed in a tree, near the nest, with the fish and watched the sky intently as if she was waiting for her mate to return. It would've been lovely to have been there when he flew in and they met up again but we'd be long gone by then. We really couldn't hang about so left at 10.14am hoping that she didn't have to wait for too long.

15mins later Wendy spotted a roadside Café called Ralia and not knowing where her next coffee fix would come from she had to grab every opportunity, plus the W.C would be very welcome. Just as we parked up the entire human contents of a coach tour got off so it was a race against time, get stuck behind that lot and we'd be there all day! Wendy ran past them, overtaking them on the stairs and made it to the counter in first place....Phew! The Café was upstairs and I believe the view from up there was brilliant and perfect for a coach tour stop off.....I'll remember that for next time. Having already been held up so early on in the day we needed to make a move but just down the road were some road works....Urrghhhh! We spent a painful 15mins waiting so we watching more Red Grouse until we were escorted by a Road works vehicle in a 10mph convoy until we were clear (that must be an exciting job for the driver.....yawn!). For the first time all week there were now clouds over the Scottish hills and the forecast for the coming week wasn't looking good.

Our next plan was to go to Douglas Water in Clyde where there was a long staying Snow Goose, which would be another lifer for us both. The further South we travelled the nicer the weather became and as a bonus we were treated to 2 x F15 Jets blasting through the valley over us.....Cool :). I was feeling good about the journey down apart from another massive roundabout, which I always sweat over. I'd planned it as usual but for some reason my Sat Nav made me get in the wrong lane and took us off the motorway and down towards a road system so massive it was like something you'd find in San Fransico! Obviously I freaked out and shouted, "Stupid Sat Nav!" to which the ever-encouraging Wendy replied, "Stupid Peter?" Grrrrrrr! Luckily the Sat Nav recovered itself and got us out of the mess. That minor hiccup aside we pulled in at Bothwell Services at 1.02pm for a W.C break and coffee fix. After stretching our legs and taking a very quick rest we left at 1.21pm and were at our site by 1.45pm. We could see some Geese grazing on the grassy hill absolutely miles away so I parked the car up (got beeped by some local chavs) and we had a scan. It wasn't long before I'd spotted it (not hard haha) and said, "**Snow Goose!**"



That was the 6th lifer for me and 7th for Wendy so it was looking as though it could just be possible for her to get 10 on this trip :P. We got back in the car and ate our lunch before leaving at 1.59pm for our next stop off. Campfield Marsh was going to a couple of hours drive away but there was a Great White Egret there so hopefully it would be worth it.

The route to RSPB Campfield Marsh would take us straight through the middle of Carlisle so I reprogrammed the Sat Nav to come off the motorway later so I could work up through the normal roads. This added 40 minutes onto the journey but for me it would be worth it....or so I thought.

We arrived at 3.53pm after having taken absolutely ages to drive through the single-track roads and also getting lost at one point. There was no Visitor Centre or anything but luckily a bloke arrived just before us so we followed him straight out to the hide where the reports had come from. Looking out over the pool it appeared to be pretty quiet with nothing more than the 'usuals' knocking around. After a scan of the reeds at the very back of the reserve we could just about make out a large white shape hunched up and looking very unimpressive. Yet again it

was miles away but it could only be one thing though....**Great White Egret!** Wendy was now on her 8th lifer but could we manage 2 more? We watched it for a while doing absolutely nothing and when it stretched it's neck up I grabbed a quick record shot.



We prayed it would come onto the marsh to feed, as some of the photos on BirdGuides were superb. For a second we thought there would be some action when a Peregrine swooped in flushing all the small waders but unfortunately the Egret stayed put so we decided to clear off and get going. Back at the car at 4.57pm we thought we'd pay the Car Park Pool down the road a quick visit while we were there. When we pulled up we found that the sun was in our faces and we couldn't see anything so 3mins later we drove away to get last leg of the journey to Leighton Moss out of the way before we were too tired.

Driving out also took me through the windy single-track roads and I realized all the extra distance to get there had hammered my range. I thought I'd better fill the car up again as it was telling me that it would be out of petrol 2 miles short of Heysham! The first place I tried was absolutely heaving with queues of people still panic buying, there was even a Traffic Marshall there, so I carried on hoping I'd find another on the way. Luckily I did and this time it was quiet....Phew!

Eventually we were at Leighton Moss, which is always our last stop before going home. There'd been a long staying Glossy Ibis reported daily from the Egret roost so we thought we'd try our luck. We actually drove past the roost on the way to the reserve and had a quick look but there was nothing apart from a handful of **Little Egrets** so we carried on hoping to find the Ibis elsewhere. We parked up in the car park at the back of the Visitors Centre feeling totally knackered at 6.45pm. Normally the building would be in darkness and locked up at that time of night but the lights were on and it was very much open. First we thought that there must've been a talk or presentation going on but it turned out to be a Wedding Reception! It seemed like a strange place to hold such an event but maybe it was for a member of staff or something. We had a quick look at the feeders where somebody, much to my amusement, had to stand on the kiddie/midget step to be able to see anything.



Heading towards the footpath we added a pair of lovely **Marsh Tits** to our list and dragged ourselves down to the Public Hide.



We started to have feelings of Déjà vu as we walked down the path. Just like last May we'd not been bitten by midgies up in Scotland but as soon as we got to Leighton Moss they were out in force. Slumped in the hide we only found 1 new bird, which was **Pochard** and a herd of Deer were settling for the night in the fields. There was no sign of the Ibis and we'd given up all hope of adding anything else to our trip list. We were getting really tired and hungry but the only food we had left was a couple of baps left over from earlier so we walked back to the car. Maybe we should have gatecrashed the wedding party and stuffed our faces with lovely things but I think they may have been on to us within seconds. With our, anything but smart, clothes covered in mud they were more likely to think we were the local tramps :P. We decided to go back to the Egret roost to eat our measly tea in the car as a last ditch attempt to see if we could find the Ibis.

By now it was 7.27pm and the light was fading but we counted 37 x Little Egrets feeding around the edge of the pool. Slowly but surely they started to fly up into the trees on the island to roost. We kept an eye out as we munched on our food but it felt pointless. We were pleased to see a **Marsh Harrier** out hunting over the field next to the car, as it was the only one we'd seen since arriving. All of a sudden I spotted something, which appeared from nowhere.....**Glossy Ibis!** It had sneaked its way into the lower branches and was sitting there, preening...cool :). It was quite difficult to see in the darkness but we could just about make out its glossy sheen and long curved bill. I grabbed a 'National Geographic cover shot' and got some video before it moved onto the ground and became even more camouflaged against the brown earth.



This was Wendy's 9th lifer and my 7th and we'd been lucky to have seen it at all.....very lucky. Eventually it lifted up and flew to roost out of sight at the back of the island so that was our cue to leave. First we had to go back to the Visitor Centre for a W.C break and to put the days rubbish in the bins. As we were getting out of the car a Woodcock flew over us and Wendy spotted 2 x bats flying around and yet again we really regretted not bringing the bat detector on the trip. I went into the Men's in the main building which was a bad move as I was totally put off by some bloke 'beat boxing' while having a wee! The Ladies was packed

with cackling women all dressed up for the event so Wendy (not wanting to stick out like a sore thumb) made the wise move to use the disabled loos outside...I was soooo jealous. As we drove away we were both feeling quite good and more awake than on our previous trips. We just hoped we could hold out until the 2.15am boat, and there was one more place we had to go to before that.

We parked up on the Prom in Arnside and crossed over the road towards our 'local pub' The Albion. Normally this place is a welcome retreat and we can sit down in a quiet corner and veg but for whatever reason it was absolutely packed....Nooooooo! There was only 1 table free so I pounced on it while Wendy got some drinks in. We can only presume that the new Landlord must be doing something right :P. Every table was taken and everyone was eating so considering our frugal intake over what had been long day Wendy went to the bar and ordered some chips to share. Literally 20 seconds later a bowl of piping hot freshly cooked chips appeared on the table and although there was probably only about 10 they went down a treat.....om nom nom :). It wasn't long before the place was quiet again as all the diners had finished their food and had left so we could finally chill out. It's funny how 'the slump' always hits us when we sit down at the Albion but regardless it's just about the only thing to do by that point in the day. Wendy made a quick phone call home to check the weather conditions and returned to the table totally stunned to hear that it was REALLY windy in the IOM. There wasn't a breath of wind in Arnside so we hadn't been in the least bit worried about the crossing....until then! After a couple of drinks and becoming the only people in a massive bar we'd just about exhausted the pub and needed to get going so we went back to the car and Wendy dug out the Stugeron in preparation :/.

We left at 11.07pm and it was freezing outside or maybe it was just that we were incredibly tired. We had our fingers crossed for some kind of Owl on the narrow country roads out of Arnside as we usually come across something even if it's just Deer crossing the road. Wendy spotted some trees which looked like a likely looking spot and said, "Pull over and listen for Tawny Owl?" I did, so we wound the windows down and instantly heard a sound that we'd not heard at all so far on the trip, a **Tawny Owl** :). A bit further on she saw another good spot and told me to pull over again. Straight away we heard another Tawny Owl. Just after driving away she spotted an Owl hunting over a field just next to the gate so I pulled over again and Wendy said, "Barn Owl!" I disagreed with, "Tawny!" Hmmmm silly me...it was a Barn Owl, well I was tired! Passing the Petrol Station in Lancaster I was relieved to have filled the car up earlier as it was shut and closed off with barriers. I don't know what we'd have done if we'd relied on that one to get us to the boat. We'd probably have conked out and had to phone the AA!

We pulled up at Heysham Port at 12am and prepared ourselves for the long wait ahead. We both ended up falling asleep in the car a couple of times while they were loading up all the freight, which always seems never ending. Just when it looked like we'd be next on a load more turned up...late! Hilariously just before we boarded I noticed that I finally had a 3g signal for the first time in the holiday. Useless O2! The late loading meant that we didn't board until 1.57am but as soon as we got to the cabin, tired and cold we fell straight to sleep. When I woke up I was certain we were in Douglas as it felt quite rough but when I looked out of the window all I could see was total darkness. Good job we slept through the majority of the crossing! The next thing we knew was the public service announcement telling us to go to our cars and we drove off at 6.13am.

We were at home by 6.21am and as usual, after Wendy had unpacked and I'd gone through the millions of photos we went out. Wendy sent a text to her Mum

letting her know that we were back and moaned about how dead Langness was....what a come down from Scotland! A minute later my eyes nearly popped out of my head when I noticed a **Short-eared Owl** flying straight over our heads! Wendy had to take her last comment back :).

At the end of the holiday I'd driven 1,368 miles in total and we had seen 119 species. Not bad for March in the Highlands. Going in March had worked out perfectly for us especially with hitting the jackpot and it ending up as the hottest week in March ever :). My bird of the trip was hard to choose but I went with Ptarmigan. The amount of effort we'd put in to see them and the unbelievable views we had of the pair will stay with me forever. It was a tough decision but Wendy went with the unforgettable but brief Capercaillie moment. They are such bizarre birds, almost prehistoric and something she NEVER dreamt she'd ever see in real life. The amount of effort we'd put in for them too was undeniable but well worth it to see a bird, who's future unfortunately is very much hanging in the balance.

Bird list

Mute Swan	Little Grebe	Curlew	Chiffchaff
Whooper Swan	Great Crested Grebe	Greater Yellowlegs	Goldcrest
Pink-footed Goose	Fulmar	Redshank	Long-tailed Tit
Greylag Goose	Gannet	Kittiwake	Blue Tit
Snow Goose	Cormorant	Black-headed Gull	Great Tit
Canada Goose	Shag	Common Gull	Crested Tit
Barnacle Goose	Little Egret	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Coal Tit
Brent Goose	Great White Egret	Herring Gull	Willow Tit
Red-breasted Goose	Grey Heron	Iceland Gull	Marsh Tit
Shelduck	Red Kite	Guillemot	Nuthatch
Wigeon	Marsh Harrier	Razorbill	Treecreeper
Gadwall	Hen Harrier	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Magpie
Teal	Sparrowhawk	Stock Dove	Jackdaw
Mallard	Buzzard	Woodpigeon	Rook
Pintail	Golden Eagle	Collared Dove	Carrion Crow
Shoveler	Osprey	Barn Owl	Raven
Pochard	Kestrel	Tawny Owl	Starling
Tufted Duck	Peregrine	Great Spotted Woodpecker	House Sparrow
Eider	Water Rail	Skylark	Tree Sparrow
Long-tailed Duck	Moorhen	Meadow Pipit	Chaffinch
Goldeneye	Coot	Rock Pipit	Greenfinch
Red-breasted Merganser	Oystercatcher	Pied Wagtail	Goldfinch
Goosander	Ringed Plover	Dipper	Siskin
Red Grouse	Lapwing	Wren	Linnet
Ptarmigan	Pectoral Sandpiper	Dunnock	Lesser Redpoll
Black Grouse	Ruff	Robin	Scottish Crossbill
Capercaillie	Snipe	Blackbird	Bullfinch
Red-legged Partridge	Woodcock	Fieldfare	Yellowhammer
Pheasant	Black-tailed Godwit	Song Thrush	Reed Bunting
Red-throated Diver	Bar-tailed Godwit	Mistle Thrush	