

When I asked Wendy what she wanted for her Birthday she said, "Red Squirrels!" so considering it was her big 40th I hatched a cunning plan and set to work. I couldn't risk using up too many of our holidays at such an early stage in the year, so I looked at a long weekend in nearby Dumfries and Galloway. Our only problem was that we couldn't take Lyca with us because most of the places we wanted to visit had a 'no dog' policy.....Boooooo :(. We really wanted her to come with us and it would've been great travel experience for her before our Scotland trip but luckily Wendy's Mum was on hand and willing to do a bit of Dog sitting. We'd already been impressed with Dumfries and Galloway after a flying visit on the way up to the Highlands previously and I'd earmarked a place called 'The Shack' to stay at, as my Mum and Dad had rated it highly when they stayed there. The accommodation was a lovely wooden chalet set in woodland with resident Red Squirrels. Not only that but my Dad had actually fed the Squirrels out of his hand after patiently coaxing them in with Monkey Nuts at the French Windows. This sounded like exactly what she was looking for but unfortunately my master plan fell flat on its back at the crucial moment when I tried to book it. Even though it appeared on the website as being available it turned out that they hadn't updated it and it'd already been booked....Urrghhhh!

Looking around at what else was available at such short notice was depressing and there was nowhere we fancied. It ended up being a case of just picking somewhere with a great garden and Red Squirrels and I eventually found a suitable candidate. Looking at Google Maps I saw that it even had woods either side of it plus it boasted Roe Deer and Red Squirrels regularly visiting the garden, so I booked it.....sorted. Wendy wasn't impressed with the pictures of the inside of the Cottage at all but at the end of the day it was only a base to return to after being out all day. As long as it was clean and warm we'd be happy and it certainly looked clean. It was also practically right on the doorstep of the owner's house and a bit too close for comfort but we'd never had a problem with that before. It was exciting to think that finally we'd be able to put some time into exploring the places we'd read about for ourselves.

As the trip grew closer the wind predictably grew stronger but we'd seen that coming! Unbelievably it died right down the day before our sailing but picked up again on the day we were going. To add insult to injury it was set to disappear again the day after.....Grrrrrrrrrr! Typical! Wendy had taken the Friday and Monday off but I thought I'd chance going in to work on the Monday, even though we'd be getting in at 6am, to save my holidays. I just hoped I could sleep in the cabin or I'd be good for nothing never mind a day at work. The cabins had all gone for our return crossing so again I had to book one of the disabled cabins and hoped we'd have no repetitions of our shared toilet door fiasco last time.

After reluctantly dropping Lyca off at Wendy's Mums house we headed off to the Sea Terminal knowing that it was going to be a rough journey. When we arrived it was 6.59pm and we were very surprised to see how busy it was! There were Campervans everywhere and we soon realized that it was people going away for Crufts, as well as some Motor Sport event and there was even a large party of young kids wearing Sports Team gear. What the.....? Ah well, at least we had a cabin and could escape the racket all the dogs and kids would be making. Just 16mins after we'd parked up we were boarding and we departed early at 7.40pm. As predicted the Captain announced that the sea conditions were choppy and that the sailing would be uncomfortable.....Great! We hoped that the sheer volume of passengers and their huge vehicles would help stabilize the ship like last time but the wind was hitting us side on, so it didn't help in the slightest.

We lay down on our beds and hoped for the best and although the 1st part of the journey was unpleasant it calmed right down for the 2nd half....Phew! Wendy even managed to get some sleep but I couldn't settle at all, but it didn't matter, as I only had a 2½hr drive ahead of me for a change. We were called to our cars at 11.25pm and were disembarking at 11.43pm with Wendy's 1st plan being to hit the Café.

After grabbing some drinks (not coffee by the way :O) and crisps she waited for someone to come and serve her. She rang the bell and waited, rang it again and waited, and waited until she finally got sick of waiting and walked out empty handed. She'd thought it was weird when she'd found Mr Red Eyes asleep behind the counter a few years ago but at least there'd been someone there, even if he did need waking up first! We left the Terminal at 11.48pm into the rain, hoping that we'd get to our destination quickly and without making any mistakes on the way.

Friday 7th March

Everything went according to plan but I felt strangely tired, which I suppose was because I'd just finished 4 days at work and hadn't managed to sleep on the boat. I could feel myself nodding off at times and it was a real struggle to stay awake. Approaching Gatehouse of Fleet on a dark and small winding road it was lashing it down with rain but it didn't stop a psycho lorry driver from tailgating me. Twice he went over onto the wrong side of the road, once on a blind bend, so I hit the brakes just to make a point and he had the nerve to flash me! What an idiot!

At 2.17am we finally arrived at our HQ, 'Clachan Cottage' in Anwoth and held our breath as I opened the door. When we stepped inside we were pleasantly surprised to find that it was lovely and warm and Wendy set about unpacking our stuff while I carried the heavy bags in from the car. Although it was very old fashioned and not to Wendy's contemporary taste what so ever, it was spotlessly clean and had a homely feel to it. The log burner was still alight and set out in the kitchen was a tea tray including 2 homemade Scones and 2 biscuits for our arrival. There was also a pint of milk in the fridge and a very nice welcome note saying that they'd even put the electric blanket on for us.....Wow! By 3.10am we were knackered and the sleep inducing electric blanket was a very welcome luxury to start our holiday.

I was up and raring to go at 7.35am and my 1st move was to open the curtains to hopefully see the local Red Squirrels. The numerous bird feeders were all fully stocked up and there was certainly a lot of action going on in the garden.



View from living room

There were birds everywhere! First off was a **Robin** then **Blue Tit**, **Chaffinch**, **Coal Tit**, **Blackbird**, **Great Tit** and **Dunnock** but there was no sign of any Red Squirrels so I began to worry.....Uh oh! How disappointing would it be to find that what the website really meant was that they occasionally see them there but they're be no means a regular feature? Wendy was still asleep when I saw a **Nuthatch** come to the feeder and fly off with a nut, so I kept my fingers crossed that it would come back after she'd finally surfaced. A **Greenfinch** was next, followed by a **Treecreeper** flying between trees at the top of the garden. I then spotted 2x **Buzzards** going over the house and a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** came in onto the nut feeder. Even though the birds I was seeing were mainly common ones, it was the numbers that impressed me more than anything.

At 8.45am Wendy finally appeared and had a look outside through the French Windows. She too commented as to how many birds were coming and going and started to rack them up to catch up with me. The Nuthatch luckily put in an appearance and it turned out that there was, actually 2 of them. I went out and checked the 2 Squirrel feeders but my heart sank when I found them both empty. Surely this meant that if there was no food out then there were no Squirrels to feed? All of a sudden the sky turned dark and there was a heavy shower, although it'd started off looking like it could be a nice but windy day. Fortunately it soon passed over and the sun came out again. We'd brought food including milk, cereal, bread, cheese and crisps with us, so that we didn't have to go shopping or buy our food out somewhere on our 1st day, which worked a treat. While Wendy had her breakfast and made sarnies for our lunch we carried on checking the garden for anything new and added **Rook**, **Mistle Thrush** and **Wood Pigeon** to our garden list. Still feeling slightly peckish after our breakfast we both polished off the Scones from the tea tray and very nice they were too.....Om nom nom :).

Once we'd got ourselves organized we made a move to go out for the day. The plan was to get the biggest drive of the trip done 1st so we were going to Stranraer to look for Divers, Grebes and Sea Ducks at Loch Ryan. When I was last there 10yrs ago, there were Scaup really close in, which isn't something you'd see very often at all. There was also a recently reported Med Gull hanging around, so we certainly had enough to keep us busy for the day.



Cottage (ours was the tiny one on the left by the way!)

While I was taking our camera gear out to the car, one of the owners came over to introduce her self. She asked if everything was OK and checked that we didn't have any problems, so I assured her that we didn't and that everything was fine. She said that the Roe Deer had cleared off since they'd felled the trees surrounding them. Unfortunately they'd been Larch and with the disease spreading there was nothing else they could do, so they had to go. She also told me that everywhere was very muddy and said that she hoped that we'd brought our wellies with us. When I told her that we hadn't she asked me what size feet I had and said that her husbands would probably fit me. Wendy finally appeared and thanked her for the scones, which were actually Rock Buns that her husband had made, and for putting the electric blanket on. They'd both been really nice and thoughtful touches that were much appreciated. While they were chatting Wendy spotted a lovely bright yellow male **Siskin** on the feeders in their garden and a **Pheasant** foraging around at the top. She then went on to say that she'd had a Red Squirrel earlier and call us skeptics but we just couldn't see it, so we really hoped that she wasn't just saying it to cover her back. We wandered over the road to the car and as it was relatively sunny Wendy took the opportunity to get some pics of our location. Over the road from us was Anwoth Old Church and the setting was looking good as a whole.



Anwoth Old Church

We found out after we got home that Anwoth, the Old Church and the owners house, which is the Old School House, was where the cult 1973 film 'The Wicker Man' was filmed. There's actually a guy who's done a pilgrimage there!

I drove off up the road at 10.28am and onto a track just as the sky turned dark again and it started to hail heavily, which turned to sleet! Great! Again it was short lived and before long we passed a smallish Loch where Wendy spotted a nice male **Goosander** out on the far side. Next we wanted to check out the nearest town of Gatehouse of Fleet and took a spin through the main street to get our bearings. We spotted the cashpoint and the pub, which my Mum and Dad had recommended for if we wanted to eat out. Also there's a Café they'd rated for breakfast or lunch and great Coffee for Wendy! They even make and sell their own 'Galloway Lodge Preserves' to sell in the adjoining shop so we'd have to pop in at some point to pick up some pressies.

After that we headed straight to Laurieston Drive, which is famed for its Red Kites and cracking scenery. Climbing up from Gatehouse of Fleet the road passed through an upland area, which was a very impressive view, so we both got out to try and get a picture that represented what we could see. The pictures, as always, just didn't do it justice though!



Laurieston

As the road dropped from the tops we passed Laurieston Forest, where we had our 1st **Red Kite** sighting. The birds just kept coming into view until we'd clocked up 7 in total. When I'd found a suitable place to stop, which was easier said than done, we got out with our cameras hoping that one of them would come closer.



Red Kite field

Although the birds had been close initially they'd flown further away, which was just typical! Wendy spotted a **Roe Deer** bouncing away from us back into the Forest and in the roadside trees there were 2 x Treecreepers and a small flock of **Long-tailed Tits**. Seeing as the Kites were no longer photographable we thought we'd try our luck with the Long-tailed Tits but they were flitting through the branches at 100mph and never came out to give us a clear shot. We ended up spending far too much time trying and failed miserably, so called it a day and left after adding **Skylark** and **Starling** to our list.

Our 1st **Rabbit** of the trip hopped across the road in front of us and we passed another Loch with a **Cormorant** on it and a field with some **Greylag Geese** grazing. There were even more Red Kites further along the road but we just couldn't find a layby to stop in so had to forget about getting any pics. Eventually I found somewhere, pulled over and we jumped out with our cameras. There were **Jackdaws** over the fields and the Kites were again right above us but either the sun was behind them or they were behind trees giving us less than perfect conditions. Needless to say that we totally messed up every single shot....Urrghhhh! Luckily for Wendy she came out with this one, which isn't bad considering.



Red Kite

We just hoped that we'd get another chance at some point during our trip.

Back at the car it was reading 3c but as we drove through Clatteringshaw Forest and past Clatteringshaw Loch it dropped to 2.5c and there was a faint scattering of snow high up on the hills either side of the valley.



Clatteringshaw Loch

We stopped briefly in the car park when we spotted some **Wild Goats** and Wendy jumped out to get some pics. There was a big info board just in front of the fence, which called it a 'Wild Goat Park' and they even had food out for them so we couldn't help but wonder just how wild the Goats actually were.



'Wild' Goat Park

As we drove off there was yet another sleet shower and this time it was really heavy keeping the temperature at a chilly 2.5c. By the time we'd reached the sign for Newton Stuart it had all changed again and it was bright and sunny, although the strong wind was still very much there. We passed a field of Crows and Wendy noticed a couple of **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** amongst them, further along was a **Mallard** on a pond and a **Magpie** flying between trees. As we grew nearer to Stranraer I noticed a diversion sign, so I followed it and ended up going the wrong way :P. I turned round and got myself back on track noticing the **Black-headed Gulls** flying about, so we were definitely getting near the sea.

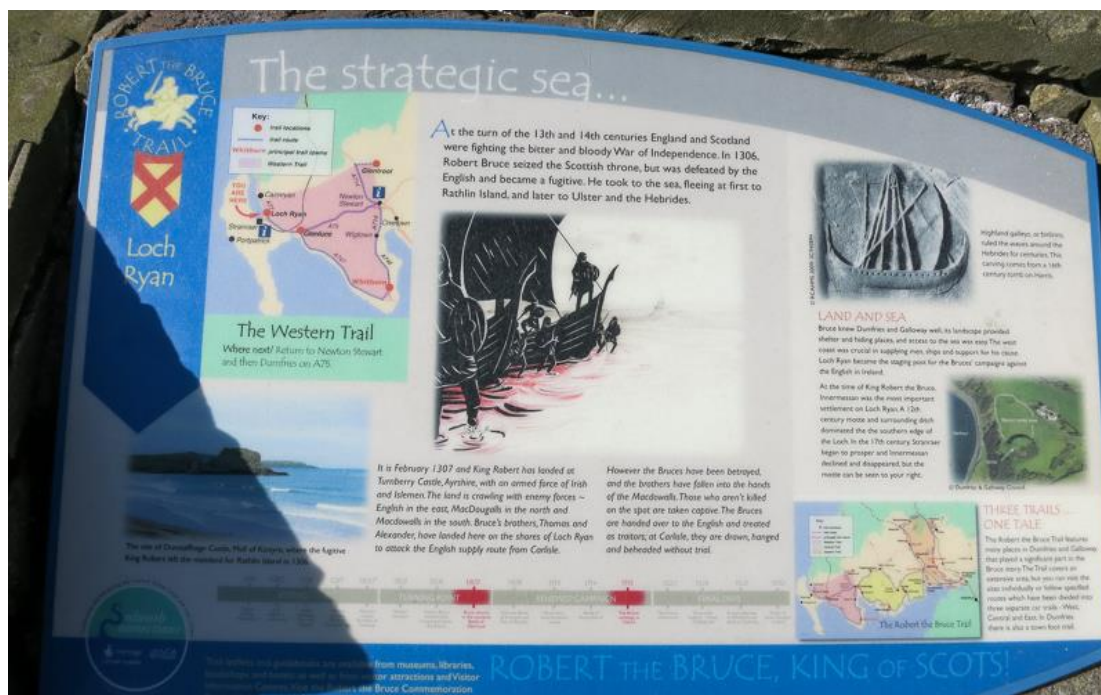
Shortly after we were finally in Stranraer and I drove towards the massive sea front and pulled up for a scan of the HUGE Loch Ryan.



Loch Ryan

There were 2x **Shelducks** on a pool in a Farm field over the road and 100's of **Oystercatchers** roosting down on the rocks behind the sea wall with a good number of **Curlew**. Wendy was by then bursting to find a WC after the drive, so we'd have to keep our eyes peeled. There were Gulls everywhere including some **Common Gulls** but no sign of the Med Gull but it could've been anywhere and we were going to have our work cut out if we were going to find it. Out in the bay we picked out at least 10x **Red-breasted Mergansers**, a refreshing change

to the single birds we find occasionally on the IOM. There was also a huge group of **Goldeneye** and **Wigeon** but nothing that stood out to us. I drove along to the next layby hoping to find something new but only managed **Ringed Plover** and **Pied Wagtail**. It was soooooo windy but Wendy got out to get some pics, using the info board as shelter so she didn't get blown away.



Info Board

There was one of those static caravan style Cafes near us but Wendy didn't fancy walking in to look for a toilet (even though the whole place looked like a toilet!) so she'd have to hang on for a bit longer. We ate our lunch in the car and added **Feral Pigeon** and **Great Black-backed Gull** to our list before taking a spin through the town to try and find the WC's. The town itself was anything but pretty and we saw no signs for any toilets, so emerged back onto the sea front with our mission unaccomplished.

My next plan was to drive over to the left hand side of the bay and as I did we spotted some **Pale bellied Brent Geese** feeding at the waters edge and some **Eiders** bobbing about on the rough sea. Just then something caught my eye and I called out, "**Slavonian Grebe!**" which was very nice to see, even at a distance :). We also picked up **Black Guillemot** and **Shag** then parked up in a layby.



I was hoping the Slav Grebe would come closer for pics but when we noticed that there was a very tame **Rock Pipit** just next to the car we grabbed our cameras and got some shots. This is the best one I came up with.



Rock Pipit

I got the impression that the Slav wasn't going to come any closer so ditched the idea off, in favour of reinstating our search for the WC's.

We ended up driving through Kirkholme at 2pm adding **Collared Dove** to our list but try as we might we couldn't find any loos. I was dying for some chocolate by then too, so when we spotted a shop I parked up outside and Wendy jumped out to go in and hopefully ask where there was some WC's. There were some locals nearby who were looking at us like we had 2 heads or something but we soon found out why. The shop was locked and in darkness with all the windows boarded up.....Urrghhhhhh! No chocolate for me then! We had no idea where to try next, so ended up back on the sea front at Stranraer where Wendy spied a Slav Grebe in close. I pulled into a layby only to find that it'd disappeared. We thought it must've gone round the corner so decided to walk across the beach to catch up with it. There was a **Red-throated Diver** way out in the bay and through the rear windscreen Wendy found some Geese on the hill behind us. She told me but I was too busy trying to locate the Slav and thought that she'd have checked them out. Unbeknown to me she hadn't, as she couldn't see them very well out of the back window, so although they were more than likely to be Pink feet neither of us could confirm it. Even when we got out the car to start our walk we totally forgot to look at them...Doh! As we walked along the stones by the sea we found **Redshank** and a bird popped up from a dive in the sea. I optimistically thought, "Here we go, Slav Grebe's back!" but it turned out to be just a **Razorbill**, so we carried on until we could see round the corner where it had been heading. There was absolutely no sign of it but Grebe's are so annoying, they just disappear never to be seen again! On the way back Wendy was so desperate and with no WC's in sight she had to go there and then....Hahahahahaha!

There was nothing else for it than to give up so we got back in the car at 2.30pm and set off to Tesco for some bits and bobs. While I was driving I saw something running across the road at lightning speed and couldn't believe my eyes. I

shouted out, “**Stoat!**” but Wendy was looking out to sea and was gutted that she’d missed it. I didn’t think for a second that we’d see Stoat on this trip, so it was a real unexpected bonus. I parked up at Tesco and we went in to pick up some stuff. I grabbed the nearest Snickers and just before we went through the tills I noticed the bakery section. I couldn’t resist a yummy looking pain au chocolat sitting there, much to Wendy’s disgust, so I grabbed it! Back at the car Wendy opened the wrapper and broke a tiny piece off but was slightly put off by something resembling cobwebs all over it. She spat the bit she’d just put in her mouth out, as she could feel the weird stuff hanging down and tickling her lip. She reckoned it looked like an overspill of melted plastic from when the plastic wrapper had been sealed.....Yuk! It didn’t put me off though and I demolished the lot :P. While we were sitting in the car we couldn’t help but notice how many Chavs and weirdos were around, some of which looked like alcoholic tramps. We weren’t expecting Stranraer to be particularly posh but there must be a nice part of town somewhere? The only thing we had left to do was to look for the Med Gull back near where we’d started where the river joins the sea, so we headed straight back.

The 1st thing we saw was 100’s of Black-headed Gulls all together in the Farm field over the road, so we jumped out for a look. They were all asleep and close together making picking out a Med Gull impossible.



The same could be said for the river outlet where the Med Gull had been reported. There were groups of Gulls as far as the eye could see and our Med Gull could’ve been anywhere but we just didn’t have the time or the will to look through them all. I’d just been commenting at the lack of Scaup, as I’d expected to have found some by then, when Wendy pointed to what looked like one close in. She didn’t have her bins up and nor did I but I grabbed my camera and ran across the road for a shot. I focused in on the bird but my quickly heart sank when I realized that it was actually a **Tufted Duck** (minus even the faintest tuft!), which was very weird. I’d have put money on it being a Scaup, as a Tuftie in the sea isn’t what you’d expect to see at all. I then noticed a **Turnstone** while Wendy found a nice male **Pintail** amongst the nearby Wigeon. Looking much further out towards the sewerage outlet out of sheer desperation, we eventually found some more Ducks, which luckily turned out to be **Scaup** and **Common Scoter**.....Phew! It was a bit annoying that they were so far out, as when I was in Stranraer last time the Scaup were only about 20ft away. The only thing we hadn’t manage to find was the Long-tailed Ducks, which would’ve been nice but hey ho. It was absolutely freezing in the wind and we needed to get going to

another place, on the opposite side of the bay, for another bird we always enjoying seeing due to it's recent disappearance back at home.

As I approached the layby to a stretch of gorse lined coastal footpath I got a bad feeling about the area. There was rubbish everywhere and the main road was busy with huge lorries heading to the Ferry Terminal to take their cargo to Ireland. It looked so scummy that I just didn't fancy leaving my car there, so made the decision to sacrifice seeing Yellowhammer for having a car to get us back home in. By then it was 3.49pm and we still had one more place to go, so we left. On the coast road to our destination Wendy spotted a Diver, which she reckoned was a Great Northern but I couldn't stop anywhere, as I had a car behind me and there were no laybys, so we couldn't say for sure.

The scenery on the drive was lovely and reminiscent of The Sound and Cornwall and there were fields of sheep with tiny lambs everywhere....cute!



Wendy spotted a **Brown Hare** on the way and after a deceptively long drive we parked up in the car park at the Mull of Galloway to take in the view. Having seen the tiny projection that is the Mull of Galloway from the Point of Ayre I was surprised as to how much of the IOM was visible.



Isle of Man from Mull of Galloway

We could see the entire West coast from the Calf of Man all the way up the Point of Ayre! It looked really close too and we could clearly see the lighthouse and foghorn at the POA and the power station chimney at Peel.....cool! Had it not been such a clear day we may not have had such a great view, so we'd been very lucky. Wendy found a pair of **Stonechats** down on the heath and I spotted a **Gannet** flying over the sea, way below us. We considered taking a wander around but with the clock still ticking and it being so windy we quickly dismissed the idea, there didn't seem to be much about anyway. At 4.43pm I drove away to head for home.

We knew it was going to be late when we got back so Wendy reckoned we should stop somewhere for food on the way. I wanted to try the Pub my Mum and Dad had recommended but with a quick detour back to the cottage 1st to get changed. On the return journey we noticed a huge flock of Waders flying high up in the sky and a quick scan of them revealed **Golden Plover**. Back on the coast road I managed to find a layby and we finally confirmed Wendy's Diver as being not 1 but 3x **Great Northern Divers**. Driving back through Stranraer we noticed a new housing estate going up and I read the advert board. For a 3-4 bedroomed detached property it was only £85,000.00.....unbelievable!

On the way home we accidentally managed to find the military airfield, which I'd read in the Best Birdwatching site guide as being good for SEO's and Hen Harriers coming in to roost. We were there at the best time too with the sun just beginning to go down, so we were quietly confident. I drove slowly down the narrow road with perfect habitat on either side of us and we both had our eyes peeled. All of a sudden and out of nowhere a Pheasant jumped out of the hedge and straight into my car! Our stomachs wrenched and I slammed on my brakes, grinding to halt. Uh oh! :(Looking back we could see a pile of feathers in the road so I got out of the car and ran up to check the casualty. I felt terrible but there was nothing I could've done to prevent the accident. As I approached the feathers I nearly jumped out of my skin when a female Pheasant flushed at 100mph and landed in the field next to the road. Having thought it was definitely a gonner I must've just clipped it and stunned it. Phew.....that was a narrow escape if I've ever seen one! Feeling much better we drove away and although we saw no SEO's or Hen Harriers we did manage to find a flock of **Fieldfare** (in the exact spot where the book said was good for winter Thrushes) and a **Sparrowhawk** zoomed in and landed in a tree. We also found some **Whooper Swans** grazing in a field and apart from that there was nothing new all the way home.

Back at HQ it was 6.10pm and after a quick change we headed out at 6.25pm for tea. I parked up outside The Ship Inn at 6.30pm and we read the menu outside finding that there was something for us both.



Ship inn

We wandered in and were shown to a table near a lovely warm log burner and ordered our drinks. It was a huge pub and very cosy but it was dead! There must've been only 3 other tables with people eating but what did we expect in March? Wendy asked if the Soup was veggie, it was Scotch Broth, as she really didn't fancy boring pasta with tomato sauce. The young lad, who was waiting on, made her laugh when he told her that soup had vegetables in it! She had to get him to ask the Chef if the stock he'd used was veggie but it wasn't. She was now struggling but eventually ordered a starter of Goats Cheese Crostini, which came with a small salad garnish and a side of chips to go with it. I ordered Butterfly Chicken in a Chorizo and Tomato Sauce with fries, which admittedly was a bit poncey for me, not to mention daring, having never tried chorizo before. The pub was very chilled and we felt very relaxed and at home after our long day of driving. We were both feeling very car bound and couldn't wait to go for a walk to stretch our legs the next day. Our food came and was very nice although after a while I started to find the Chorizo a bit overpowering. To overcome this problem I ordered a Banoffee Cheesecake for pudding! :) Even though it was microscopic and presented like the Chef thought they were on Masterchef it was gorgeous.....after Wendy had removed the sliced Bananas off the top! After I'd polished off the lot we left, as Wendy couldn't wait to get back for a long soak in a hot bath :).

It was only 3c on the way home but even so we spotted a largish Moth in the car headlights and were back at HQ at 8.02pm. As we walked up the path we could see a note on the front door and it turned out to be from owners, who'd left a pair of wellies outside for me. How nice was that? :). I doubted I'd use them but at least they were there just in case. The house was absolutely freezing when we stepped inside and the storage heaters weren't giving off any heat as such. Wendy started to run a bath but I turned it off shortly after realizing that the hot water had turned freezing cold.....she wasn't happy! I tried to get the log burner going but it kept going out.....Grrrrrrrrrrrr! Wendy came in and started to twist up some newspaper and told me to make a pyramid with the kindling, which was easier said than done. It worked a treat though and in the end we had a raging fire, so hopefully we'd be warm in no time.



Living room (without the fire going!)

Wendy was still fuming about not being able to have a bath and was standing shivering in her dressing gown and we were both confused as to how the heating system worked. We hadn't even used any hot water during the day apart from for the dishes after breakfast, so how could it have run out? I put my coat on and went next door to ask the owners what was going on. The woman came over and explained it all to me and said that if we wanted a bath there'd be hot water in the morning but by night time there wouldn't be any and it'd take 2hrs for the boost switch to heat enough. If we wanted a shower however, it would only take 1/2hr, so that was always an option if we were in a rush. Seeing as we didn't have time in the mornings and wanted to get out early Wendy would just have to wait for 2hrs when we got home. This was anything but ideal, especially on this occasion, as she certainly didn't want to be having a bath and washing her hair at 10.30 so she had to go another day before that particular luxury. After scratching my head over the storage heaters I realized that I'd have to turn all the inputs to max and set the output to what we wanted when we woke up. Then just before leaving for the day I'd have to turn them all down so as to not waste all the heat in them! Obviously this meant that when we'd be coming back in in the evening the house would be freezing. What an absolutely ridiculous system. I have all my digits crossed that we never come across this system in any other holiday cottage we stay at in the future!

Just when we thought nothing else could go wrong Wendy was cut off in the middle of her phone call to her Mum! What the.....? Up until now she'd used my phone with the Giff Gaff sim in it for free calls on my goody bag but all of a sudden there was no credit! I Googled it and discovered that Giff Gaff had started charging for calls to the IOM.....Grrrrrrrrrr! Normally we didn't have to worry about a cottage not having a phone, as she could use mine for free, but from now on we'd have to rethink before booking. It was difficult to even get a signal from the cottage too and the only place where I could pick one up was standing at the window in the living room with my head in the recess! Wendy, being slightly short, found this to be quite tricky but managed it standing on her tip toes....Hahahahaha! She tried again using the credit on her phone only to be told she'd also run out, so gave up.

I'd borrowed my Dads camera trap to see if we could capture anything interesting on it during the night so I rigged it up in the garden and crossed my

fingers. I put out some Hazelnuts to lure in any Red Squirrels too and was hoping to catch an early morning visit from one on camera. The fire had done its job nicely by then until it started to die down. I thought it was too late to put another log on it and that we'd be OK but it just didn't give off any heat after that and we went to bed cold. The bedroom was like a freezer, the electric blanket wasn't very warm at all and Wendy's toes and nose were numb! It took us ages to fall asleep but we worked out that we'd seen 68 birds during the day, which was pretty good but the prospect of getting to 100 was looking highly unlikely.

Saturday 8th March

It was 7.15am when we woke up and excitedly I went straight outside to check what we'd caught on camera. The cottage was lovely and warm, so I'd at least got my head around the stupid system! I was chuffed with this but it was dark, cold and raining outside with the strong wind still being present. I brought the camera in and had a quick look only to find nothing but the arse of what looked like a very fat Cat. I showed it to Wendy who groaned, then said, "It's very fat and low to the ground and it's tail is short and fat.....like a Badger!" This looked possible but reality kicked in after Googling pictures of Badgers and we settled on fat stumpy Cat.....Boooooooooooooo :(. That was very disappointing, as was the fact that all the nuts I'd put out for any passing Squirrels were totally untouched. It was looking like there'd be no Red Squirrels for us then. Wendy was feeling horrible after not having had a bath since Thursday afternoon but we wanted to get going and instead planned to get back earlier so she could put the 2hr boost on. Wendy recharged the credit on her phone and while we were getting ready and watching the garden feeders, a couple of **Mute Swans** and a **Jay** flew over. We realized that we'd now seen 70 birds and I, feeling a bit more optimistic, started to wonder if the big 100 was doable while Wendy doubted it very much. After more negativity she then spent a few minutes pondering the idea that she was actually Jack Dee's love child who'd been adopted by her parents :P.

While I waited for her to get ready I thought I'd go and explore the garden but 1st I thought I'd better put those wellies on. I just couldn't work out how to wear them properly and much to Wendy's amusement I asked, "Do you have to tuck your trousers into your socks before you put them on or not?" She cracked up and said, "I don't think it matters, I mean the Welly Police aren't out there waiting to arrest you if you don't!" In the end I didn't bother and headed up the path regardless but with an eye out just in case, safe in the knowledge that at least I'd put my toes in 1st, but that's another story! ;).

Heading up the path I could hear Wendy laughing, "Ooooo arrrrrrr Farrrrrrmer Pete!" Urrghhhhh.....admittedly it wasn't a good look! The 1st thing I noticed was that the great looking forest that surrounded either side of the cottage had completely gone! I'd looked on Google Maps before I'd booked it and seen that the cottage was surrounded on both sides by large conifer forests that looked really good for Red Squirrels, which made the websites claims of having them in the garden seem possible. This would explain their total absence then.....Boooooooooo!



Destroyed forest

The owners had been right about one thing though, the garden path was really muddy and it was a good job they'd given me the wellies to wear. I didn't spend long out there and had avoided arrest, so I returned to the house mud free to load up the car.

We left at 8.52am just as it started to rain and Wendy spotted 2 more Jays in the field opposite the house. She then suggested that if we reversed our time zones and stayed in and slept all day we'd be lovely and warm in the cottage and we'd even have hot water! Unfortunately this wasn't an option and we couldn't imagine birding through the night in the dark being particularly productive! There wasn't even a Tawny Owl calling in the area, which we were quite surprised about. Our 1st **Raven** of the trip flew over the road and then we found ourselves stuck behind a very slow 'Transport Exceptionnel' lorry, whatever that is! Before too long we were again watching the Red Kites appear and also came across a field of **Pink-footed Geese** and a single **Lapwing**. Wendy started to have one of her tri-polar attacks, which worried me, as it was way too early in the day to burn out yet!

We hit another diversion, which meant I had to drive through Dumfries but although it was last thing I wanted to have to do it actually turned out to be good move. Firstly I saw an Esso garage, which was good timing seeing as I needed to fill the car up. After that we spotted a Garden Centre and Wendy suggested going there for some more bird food, as we didn't know if the owners would fill up the feeders. We both could've done with finding a WC too so I pulled in only to see a sign for WC's.....excellent! After that we went into the shop and quickly bought some peanuts and some fat balls. We came out having done everything we needed to do and I opened the car boot to put the bags of bird food in. As I threw the nuts in, the bag exploded and there were peanuts everywhere....Doh! Wendy could hardly move for laughing (again) but she managed to help me scoop them all up and put them into a carrier bag she'd fortunately stashed in the door of my car. Phew!

Our next stop was at Castle Loch and we arrived and parked up at 10.27am.



Castle Loch

The Loch was huge but there were all the obvious Ducks swimming about including Tufties, Goldeneye and a few Goosanders. Wendy spotted some Black-headed Gulls so we got out of the car and started to walk along the footpath towards them and through the trees surrounding the Loch. We were there to see if we could find the Little Gull, which had been reportedly coming in to roost with the BHG's but we weren't optimistic. It could've been anywhere in the area by then and the chances of finding it amongst all the other distant Gulls looked hopeless. The woods were interesting, as wherever they'd had to fell a tree somebody had turned it into a very creative carving. What a great idea! We heard a **Goldcrest** flitting around and although there'd been loads of birds calling by the car the further we walked the quieter it became. We eventually overshot and passed the place where the Gulls had been and reached the 1st viewing platform available. We now had a great view.....of nothing in particular although the history for the area was quite interesting as it had been in use for 2000 years!



My plan had been to walk to the hide by the Castle but with so little about and it being so far away it seemed like a bit of a waste of time. We'd only managed to add **Coot** to our list but at least we'd managed to get a bit of a walk in after our

car bound day yesterday and the weather was now ok, so we couldn't complain. Even the Gulls had moved off so we turned round and headed straight back to the car.

Having not walked to the hide from the car, after I'd realized there was a car park nearby, I drove down there at 11.05am. As I parked up we were slightly underwhelmed by Lochmaben Castle itself but we stopped for some pics anyway.



Lochmaben Castle (well...walls)

We followed the boardwalk through the trees towards the hide and all of a sudden Wendy let out a, "Squeak!" She'd slipped on the boardwalk as it was slippery and there was nothing but water either side, so if she'd fallen over she'd have fallen in!



By the time we reached the hide she'd slipped 3 times and very surprisingly I'd only managed once. It's usually the opposite way round and I can only think that it was because my flat feet had worked in my favour for a change. We made it all the way to the hide with everything still dry and no accidents and sat down. The view was anything but inspiring but there was a nice male Goosander heading our way, so I decided to sit tight and hoped for the best. Sure enough the bird would appear closer to us after each dive and it was looking like we were set for

our best ever male Goosander shot, if the bird came out into the clear. It dived again and we got ourselves into position, this was the one! It surfaced just outside the hide and behind the reeds but it was swimming left into the open. We'd only have to wait a few more seconds and it'd be completely clear but.....suddenly the bird flew! Uh what? I hadn't moved a muscle so turned to see Wendy with her lens poking out the hide window! Noooooo.....Schoolboy error! The only thing I could do was laugh, as it was just typical of our luck. It flew straight over the Loch, over the trees and was gone.....completely. With no chance of the bird coming back in a hurry we got our stuff and promptly left. This is the best shot I ended up with and you can clearly see just how ridiculously close it was to being in the clear, as this is full frame! :(Thanks Wendy! :P.



Sooooo close!

One thing, which we'd started to notice was the absence of any Little Grebes, a bird we never thought we'd be struggling for. If there wasn't any there then where were they? After walking over the boardwalk of death again a **Grey Wagtail** flew over us and back at the car Wendy heard some **Redwing**, finally finding the flock of about 6 moving through the trees.

It was a very civilized 10c when we left to head for our next stop, which is a place I've wanted to visit for a long time. On the way we passed a sign for the 'Savings Bank Museum.' Rock 'n' Roll! Hahahahaha! Just up the road from our destination was a field full of **Barnacle Geese**, which is one of the things the Reserve is famed for, with a couple of **Canada Geese** in with them. This Reserve had a wintering Green-winged Teal but having dipped on several GWT's in the past Wendy could only imagine another dip coming up.

We arrived at WWT Caerlaverock at 12.15pm, so we grabbed our lunch and ate it in the car.



Caerlaverock Visitor Centre

After our lunch we went into the Visitor Centre to pay our admission, which was £7.50 each and the cheapest WWT Reserve we've ever been to. We headed out to our 1st port of call, Folly Pond, where our target bird had been seen the day before. The path to the hide was really muddy and there was a sign up asking if people could spot the Badger tracks in it. We found one, so I suppose there's got to be at least one bonus from all the rain and subsequent mud! From the hide we looked out and added **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Shoveler** and **Moorhen** but although there were loads of Teal we couldn't find the one we wanted.



Folly Pond

They were a lot of them asleep on an Island, so we thought that if we tried viewing from Tower Hide we'd stand a better chance.



Tower hide

Tower Hide was pretty high up and the steps climbing up to it were shamefully hard work but the view was a lot better.



View from Tower Hide

We sat down, albeit slightly out of breath and from there we could see birds that we hadn't been able to at Folly Pond including a **Little Egret**. A flock of 7x **Yellowhammers** flew into the bushes below us, just as Wendy announced that she'd found the Teal in question. It'd showed briefly but had gone straight back behind the long grass it'd appeared from.....Urrrrrghhhh! This was a huge relief to her having failed to see any of the ones we'd gone for previously but I still hadn't seen it! We waited for what seemed like ages until she re-found it when it launched itself into the water. She got me onto it and then tried to get a couple, probably in their 70's onto it too. The husband caught on pretty quickly but his wife was proving a bit of a challenge. I grabbed a distant record shot (through the dirty windows) of the **Green-winged Teal**, which was Wendy's 1st lifer of the trip.



Green winged Teal

We passed the woman over to her husband in the end and decided to go back through the mud to Folly Pond in an attempt to get a better shot, as it was right out in the open and probably giving good views from there. As we left Wendy was trying her hardest not laugh, at the sheer frustration in the poor guys voice, as he was still desperately trying to explain to his wife where it was. I would've liked to have got a ½ decent shot of it for the article but by the time we got back to the hide it'd gone back onto the Island and vanished again.....Noooooooooo! "Ah well, we can come back later." I said and we trotted off along the path.

Next we past some feeders and there were birds everywhere! There were all the usual suspects but also a good few **Tree Sparrows** :).



Tree Sparrow

Needless to say, we stopped and spent absolutely ages taking pics until our backs and legs could take no more. We were both having to squat to reduce our height by about 1ft to get a clear shot through the gaps in the screen, it was either that or stand on something to raise us up but there wasn't anything....Hahahahaha! We ended up with some pics we were happy with and we doubted we'd better what we already had, so we moved on to the 2 other hides nearby. There was nothing new from them so we didn't hang around but we found a nice male **Reed**

Bunting on the path back. Next we tried the Peter Scott Hide where I found a **Gadwall** and there were loads of Whooper Swans.



View from Peter Scott Hide

There was a member of staff downstairs giving a talk to a big group of visitors and they were just gearing up to watch him feed them. We didn't fancy being stuck with the hoards so we left pretty sharpish to walk down The Avenue. We'd planned to go to the hide at the end but we reached a section of path that was so flooded it was impassable. Of course, I had to have a wade in it to test how deep it was :P.



Bit too deep for us :(

The water was right up to the hedge on either side, so there was no way through or round it. We turned round and retraced our steps finding another Badger footprint. We also spotted our 1st **Goldfinch** of the trip, which had taken us a surprisingly long time considering their abundance back at home. As well as being with the Reed Bunting on the path there were loads of Yellowhammers in the hedge, which are one of our favourite birds to see. It makes you realize that with a bit help from us these lovely birds can thrive but we suspect that it's too late for ours in the IOM. Deep down I like to think these birds are remnants of the Manx population, which had the foresight to fly north away from the Isle of Man when they realized there was no food around for them.

Wendy was gasping for a drink by this point, so she ran back to the car and downed a bottle of water. When she came back she looked knackered and said she was falling off a cliff, so we decided that we needed a break. First we had another quick check of Folly Pool but still couldn't see the Teal!

We wandered back into the Visitor Centre and straight to the Café where I think my eyes were bigger than my belly. Wendy ordered a Cappuccino and asked for 2 slices of toast with butter for us to share. The woman behind the counter said that she'd give us 4 slices for the price of 2 because she needed to use the bread up before the end of the day. Wendy said, "No thanks, one slice is plenty." but as I was standing behind Wendy I held up two fingers to indicate to the nice lady. The lady gave me a wink without Wendy noticing.....Hehehe :D. Not only that but I spied some nice looking cakes at the counter, so ordered a Chocolate Brownie as well as a can of Coke! Wendy tried to talk me out of eating so much but when I'm on holiday I eat like a King, Henry the 8th to be precise :P. Wendy's Cappuccino arrived and I was so impressed by the very appropriate chocolate sprinkles on the top I got her to take a picture....Hahahahahaha!



Very pro!

The food went down a treat and Wendy was also given a free Flake because the woman had tipped the box they were in over! That was the icing on the cake for me I was stuffed and wouldn't need much for tea. After that, we walked out to Saltcot Loaning and the path was again really muddy. I suddenly realized that I'd had so much sugar that I was getting a bit hyper and regretted my OD instantly. I wasn't looking forward to the downer that would follow shortly :(To make matters worse Wendy was throwing another Karl Pilkington strop and saying, "There's no point, blah, blah, blah, why are we even bothering?" Urrghhhh! This hide was meant to be good for hunting Barn Owls, Short Eared Owl, Hen Harrier and Waders, when the tide was high, so it was worth a check. The muddy puddles on parts of the path were quite deep and although I'd got Wendy to re-proof my shoes before going away there was no escaping from the hole in them where the sole was coming away from the upper....Doh! I made a mental note to get some more ordered as quickly as possible and squelched my way towards the hide. Just before we got there Wendy noticed a Badger Sett in the bank so we stopped for a look.



Keep away murdering Tory scum!!!

When we entered the Saltmarsh Hide we could see how bad the recent flooding had been. There was water inside it and from the flattened mess outside it looked like the water had been right up to it. There was seaweed and grass hanging off all the fences, so it must've been pretty bad.



Saltmarsh

It was interesting to see but we quickly realized that Wendy had been right and there'd been absolutely no point in going through all the mud to get there. The tide was right out and there was no sign of any life at all, apart from some very strange and large poo outside the windows. Wendy wondered if it was Badger poo. Wanting to get a clearer shot she opened one of the windows only to find that it was hanging by just one hinge! I quickly made her shut it just in case the huge window fell on top of her! Although we hadn't seen any birds at least we'd seen the area, so it hadn't been a complete waste of time and we headed back.

At the top of the path all the Yellowhammers were still there, so we hung around with our cameras at the ready. They were feeding on some seed really close, so we sat down on the path and waited.



Yellowhammer area

Frustratingly, every time they started to get even closer somebody would appear on the path and scare them away. There was nothing we could do about that, so we just had to be patient. It didn't take them long to return though, so they must be used to human disturbance. We spent ages trying to get a belter but in the end all our shots were useless, well not as good as they should've been at that range.



Yellowhammer

I counted about 40 yellowhammers in total but Wendy reckoned it was more like 60+, which for us was a brilliant sight in itself. We'd spent ages there but when Wendy's back started to give up big time she called it a day. I couldn't argue with that, mine was protesting too, oh the joys of getting older! We staggered back up onto our feet and decided to pay Folly Pond a last visit before we left. You've probably already guessed by now that the Teal was still nowhere to be seen but, as it was our 4th attempt, you can't say we didn't try.....Hahahahaha! We'd just about exhausted Caerlaverock but it's easily taken over as my favourite WWT reserve and it's just annoying that it's taken us so long to visit but we will definitely be returning soon!

We left at 4.48pm and took a spin to Caerlaverock Castle, which was the best Castle we'd seen on the trip.



Caerlaverock Castle

The sky was starting to turn a very dark shade of grey but we still had one more place to try before we headed home. Unfortunately when we got to Castle Woods I couldn't find the car park and where we ended up looked too dodgy for my liking. There'd been loads of fly tipping going on, so again I didn't fancy leaving my car there, so we turned around and left straight away.

It was already quite late and I wanted to get back as quickly as possible but my Sat Nav decided to have a complete break down on me. It took me on some tiny single-track road through Farmland and Wendy was starting to get twitchy. She couldn't see how it was the way back at all but I carried on.....until we hit a 'Road Closed' sign. What the.....? I decided to ignore it and kept driving until we got to the brow of a hill and spotted that the road below us was so flooded that there was no way my car was going to get through it. Grrrrrrrrrrrr! Wendy was not impressed because it was already 5.36pm and she knew that it was going to take 2hrs after we got in before she could finally have a bath and we were nowhere near home yet. This was also depending on whether the water actually heated up at all.....Oh dear :(We were both much happier after I'd turned round and got us back on the main road but my brain had died a death after all the stress and I did a Wendy. I shouted out, "Pigs!" when we passed a field of what I thought were Pigs but Wendy took great delight in telling me that they were Sheep.....Oooops! It still wasn't a match for Wendy's Kangaroo in the Highlands by any stretch of the imagination, so I wasn't accepting it :P. As it was so late Wendy was keen to grab some food out on the way back but I didn't want to. She tried to bend my arm by telling me that although her hair was in a bad way and we were both covered in mud it didn't matter and that we didn't have any food at the cottage. I still wasn't up for it though and didn't fancy much due to having stuffed my face in the Café at Caerlaverock. I reckoned it'd be a much better idea to go out on the last night instead so we headed home.

Finally at 6.26pm we arrived back at HQ and Wendy was horrified to find the place freezing cold again. She got me to get the fire going while she made use of what hot water was left to wash her hair with, just incase the water didn't heat up for a bath. Soon after she'd disappeared into the bathroom I heard shrieks and cursing....Uh oh! She'd run out of lukewarm water ½ way through rinsing what she thought was shampoo out but by accident she'd used shower gel

instead....Doh! If she hadn't done that there'd have been just enough to do the job with but having to do it twice had used too much so she'd had to finish off with cold water. Hahahahaha! She'd been considering having a shower, as it only took 1/2hr to heat enough water but the spray was so feeble she reckoned you'd be better off standing outside in some light drizzle. She emerged looking less than happy and put the boost button on for her tedious 2hr wait.

After that fiasco she opened the fridge to get the little bits of the veggies she'd brought from home to make tea with, while I made a crisp sarnie as I couldn't face much more.



Kitchen

I sat down in the living room with my gourmet dish and took the 1st bite and loudly protested as to how horrible it was. I heard Wendy laughing in the kitchen and she replied, "Told you you should've have had Pasta, it's not too late, you still can." At that moment I couldn't be bothered and carried on eating my sarnie whilst listening to Wendy chopping vegetables in the kitchen. When I'd finished I decided that I should've had Pasta after all and set about cooking it. Wendy's tea was the best she could come up with using everything she had available, scrag ends of broccoli, cauliflower and a coarsely grated carrot boiled up with a vegetable stock cube. Hmmmmyyyy yummy! She named it 'Vaguely Soup' and sat down at the table to eat her uninspiring creation.



Mmmmm scrummy!

Although it was never destined to appear in any Michelin starred Restaurant she said it turned out to be nicer than she'd expected and was definitely better than nothing. Having thought I'd put a small portion of Pasta in the pan, after just eating my sarnie, when it was cooked it turned out to be huge....Oooops! I poured over my pouch of Bolognese sauce and wolfed the lot down.....om nom nom :). I think Wendy was slightly annoyed by that point and went on to hilariously verbally attack the dining table! She called it 'a piece of ****' and reckoned it was justified because when you sat at it the chairs didn't fit underneath, so you ended up perched right on the edge of the massive piece of wood. After waiting 2hrs she eventually got to have a bath.....in about 5" of water, which wasn't hot enough. She's used to deep baths in water you could boil a Lobster in, so was less than impressed. I had the smile wiped off my face though when she informed me that I was next.....Dohhhh!

Wendy thought she'd be clever and put the electric blanket on early while she was drying her hair. As it hadn't been very warm the night before she thought she'd give it longer in the hope that it'd do a better job. Good thinking Bat Man! As usual I put the camera trap out but by then I think we'd both given up any hope of catching anything on it but it was to be our last chance. Maybe we'd get some last day luck? Hahahahaha...dream on! The fire had died down by 10pm and I thought it was too late to put more logs on it, presuming that it would still give off enough heat to keep us warm. Of course it didn't and the temperature plummeted instantly.....Urrghhhhh! We called it a night at about 11pm thinking that bed would be a better place to be but to Wendy's horror she'd only turned the wall switch on and not the actual blanket! The bed was like a mortuary slab and her toes and nose went numb within seconds.....Brrrrrrrrrr :(.

Not the best way to end what had otherwise been a brilliant day!

Sunday 9th March

It was 7.15am when we woke up and the cottage was freezing. I quickly realized why though when I saw that I'd only gone and forgotten to do the night time amendments to every single heater. Stupid stupid system! I actually found myself joining in with Wendy and having a bit of rant of my own, well if you can't beat 'em join 'em :P. First off I went outside to check the camera trap but yet again there was nothing, not even a fat cat never mind a Red Squirrel! That was that and we totally gave up all hope of seeing any. I'd run out of Lactofree Milk

and couldn't have any breakfast but I was starving. The plan was to go to Gatehouse of Fleet to the Café at Galloway Lodge, so I could have some food and to pick up some pressies to take home. I ended up having some boring toast to tide me over until then though.

While Wendy was busy making sarnies and doing dishes in the kitchen I heard a few taps on the door. I went over to open it but couldn't work the lock and try as I might it wouldn't budge. The knocks became louder and faster which made me panic more and after what seemed like ages I realized I was turning the yale lock bit the wrong way! Finally I got the door opened only to find that it was the owner from next door and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She was telling me that there'd been a Red Squirrel on her bird table but in the time it'd taken me to open the door it'd gone! NO WAY!!! :(I stayed outside chatting to the nice lady and luckily for me I spotted it running up one of the small conifers behind the house so I ran back inside to get Wendy. It was too late by the time she got out but we stood chatting to the owner anyway. She told us that before the Larch trees were felled they used to regularly get 6-7 Squirrels and visitors used to sit in the garden watching them....Urrghhhhhh typical our luck again! While they were talking Wendy spotted the lovely little **Red Squirrel** skipping across the grass and she was over the moon. She'd said she wanted Red Squirrels for her Birthday and OK it was a bit late but still what she'd asked for and the very reason behind our trip.....Phew! :). After that the conversation stuck with Squirrels and the owner said that they'd tried everything to save their habitat and had even contacted the Red Squirrel Conservation Group but to no avail. Such a shame and she seemed genuinely upset by the whole sorry affair :(.

Back in the house we packed up our stuff and headed out at 9.15am, only to see the other owner coming over clutching some photos. He said he wouldn't keep us but wanted to show us something we might be interested in. He produced a photo of himself looking up at a Coal Tit hovering just above his head. He explained that the Coal Tit used to take peanuts from his mouth on a daily basis for about 2½ years until it'd presumably died! He also said that when they went out for a walk it used to follow them for a bit down the road.....how cute? We thanked him for sharing the lovely story with us and headed over to car. After hearing about how they tried to save the Red Squirrels and then the Coal Tit Wendy cracked up into floods of tears all the way to the Café in Gatehouse of Fleet. Needless to say I laughed the whole way there at what a total gay she is. Her problem wasn't just that it made her sad but she just wished that everyone cared as much about the things we share our planet with and how it's so rare to meet people with the same values.

After Wendy had composed herself we got out of the car and wandered over to the Café. Unbelievably, because it was Sunday it didn't open until 10am, so we had a fair bit of time to put in. We were going to explore the town anyway, so we just reshuffled our plans. First off we had a look across the road at Mill on the Fleet. This was a place my Mum and Dad mentioned a lot and said it had a nice Café. Unfortunately it was all closed but there was an interpretation board that mentioned a Wood nearby that had Wood Warbler, Pied Fly and Redstart in the summer.



My brain went into overdrive thinking about our summer trip to the Highlands and how we could take a detour there. That was it, settled, we'd have a gander at the wood after the Café as a bit of a recce for the Highlands trip in June. After that we went back across to the car park and took a walk along the river, looking for but seeing no Dippers, then into the park, where Wendy's face lit up. She'd spotted one of those things where you sit on seat and whizz along a zip wire! Even though she'd just turned 40 she was like a child at Christmas and spent the next 10mins on the thing laughing as she went!



Weeee!!

I had to get a video of her it was soooooo funny to watch but I can't put it in the article, as she'd kill me! I wanted to have a go but after sitting on the seat and the whole lot buckled downwards nearly touching the ground, I thought I better give it a miss, after all it's made for children NOT fully grown men. At least it'd cheered her up after her outburst and subsequent rant about how horrible most people are! The Woods behind the park were meant to have Red Squirrels in

them but now we'd already seen one that morning it wasn't so urgent and seeing as it was nearly 10am we headed over to the Café.

Just as we rolled up at the door one of the girls who worked there turned up and went in ahead of us. Seconds later she opened the door and put out the board, so we went straight inside. It was really warm in there and first we had a look round the shop at the gifts and homemade produce. After picking up some bits and bobs we paid and went over to find a table in the café. The Staff were really friendly and very quickly we were being asked what we'd like. Wendy obviously ordered a Cappuccino whereas I went for my 2nd breakfast of the morning, a sausage bap and a bottle of Appletiser :).



Om nom nom

I was crossing my fingers that it'd be square sausage but when it arrived it wasn't, although it was really nice. While we enjoyed our break we started to get too hot and after we'd finished we didn't fancy sitting around for long. Wendy announced that she was going to go to the WC's before we left so I took the bags and told her I'd meet her in the car. When she emerged from the toilet she heard the woman behind the till saying, "Excuse me, have you forgotten to pay?" Wendy realized that she was actually talking to her and just wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. Uh oh! She knew that I'd taken her bag including her purse outside, so she needed to get my attention. Looking down at the car through the window she could see me sitting there but I didn't look up, I was too busy messing about with my phone as usual, and already too hot she started to boil up.....how embarrassing? She kept her fingers crossed for a reception on her phone and luckily for her there was. She told me what had happened so I ran back up with her money feeling just as embarrassed. When I arrived she was standing joking about it with the woman and neither of us could believe that we'd nearly just walked out without paying :O! After that we left for the 2nd time feeling a bit more than slightly flustered.

At 11am we arrived at Carstramon Woods and the weather was lovely. The sky was blue and it felt quite warm in the sun. The wood certainly looked the part with all the huge Oak trees but there wasn't much going on in there at all. We followed the footpath up the steep hill through the trees and to the top.



Carstramon Woods

There's also meant to be Red Squirrels there and although we had our eyes peeled we didn't see any. Maybe they move out of the Woods in winter, in favour of being nearer to bird feeders in people's gardens? When we passed a huge tree Wendy couldn't resist climbing up it but then chickened out of going any higher when she realized that snow boots aren't made for climbing.



Bear Grylls eat your heart out!

By the end we were actually too hot in our cold weather gear and had to shed our hats and gloves! The walk was a nice loop back to the car and had definitely been a good recce for Woodland birds on our June trip.

On the way to our next stop we drove through Laurieston Drive again. As usual there were plenty of Red Kites about and when Wendy spotted one sitting at the top of tree she squealed, "Stop!" and grabbed for her camera. She really wanted a decent Red Kite pic and wasn't sure that she'd got anything from her earlier attempts but after checking when we got home her earlier shots had turned out the best. After that we spotted a small flock of **Fieldfare**, which was lucky because winter Thrushes had been very thin on the ground. By then Wendy was feeling peckish and she couldn't wait for her lunch whereas I'd had 2x breakfasts and was still going strong :P.

At 12.31pm we arrived at Ken-Dee Marshes and how different it looked to our last visit! Last time we'd been there in March 2013 a Farmer had to clear out all the snow in the car park with his tractor otherwise we'd have had nowhere to park. We'd also been the only people there but this time it looked quite busy. One serious looking 'Scottish Ornithological Club' guy was standing staring into the field by the car park holding a clicker so he was obviously counting the White-fronted Geese. We ate our lunch and took a shot of the car park to compare with last year before heading out at 1pm.



March 2014



March 2013

I grabbed a record shot of the flock of **Greenland White-fronted Geese** before we went on the proper walk to the hide.



They're White-fronts honest!

The 1st birds we saw were a few **Linnets** and then I spotted a bird sitting on top of a telegraph pole miles away. I was nearly not going to have a look but after realizing that we were struggling for Falcons I got Wendy onto it and we checked it out. To our surprise it was a **Merlin**! Wooh! This wasn't something I'd expected here at all, so I took a very distant record shot for the article :).



Miles off Merlin

Further down the path Wendy spotted a male **Bullfinch** deep in the branches of the willows and it turned out that there were 2x males and 1x female. Unfortunately they didn't come into the clear, so Wendy's record shot was worse than pants.

We'd revised the call of Willow Tit on the way down the track but we hadn't heard anything remotely like it all the way to the hide. Last time we'd been there we'd been positive that they'd be at the feeders, as it was snowing, only to find them on the way back to the car feeding high up in the trees. This time we'd been pretty sure they'd be in the trees but by then we just had to cross our

fingers that they'd come to the feeders or else we'd be leaving empty handed. In the hide I checked the Visitors Book but there'd been no entries of our target bird for a while, so our hearts sank.



View from the Hide

There was a lot of action at the feeders though with all the usual birds toing and froing including Nuthatch and Great-spotted Woodpecker.....Nice :). One thing I always complain about is not having any decent pics of common birds, so the pair of us had a field day. Wendy was desperate for a Nuthatch shot but trying to get one without the bird being on the feeder was proving to be impossible! As soon as it landed it was off again in a flash and just didn't settle on any branches.....Boooooo :(What she ended up with wasn't what she had in mind but it was still better than nothing.



Nuthatch

The Great-spotted Woodpecker was equally as annoying and being such Wiley birds it stayed round the back of the trees before emerging onto the

feeder.....Urrghhhh! It also liked to appear on a feeder on the opposite side of the hide to where we were sitting! Grrrrrr little blighter! Fortunately it did come out once or twice in the right spot and posed nicely for us briefly, allowing us both to get some decent shots in the end :). Wendy was pretty chuffed to have bettered her existing shot too.



Great-spotted Woodpecker

By then Wendy chirped up that we should start to think about making a move. I had a quick scan through the trees and tried to follow a Nuthatch to see where it was going after the feeders. All of a sudden I caught sight of our target bird which was hiding deep in the bush. I called it to Wendy but she was at the opposite side of the hide and couldn't see it. I was hoping that it wasn't the only appearance this bird was going to put in as Wendy would've been gutted she'd missed it. Fortunately it flew over to her side and she excitedly squealed, "**Willow Tit!**" and quickly grabbed a bad record shot of it deep in the branchess.



National Geographic shot

This was great! We'd actually caught up with one of the main reasons for our visit :). The tiny bird never came down to the feeders and stayed high up in the trees until it disappeared completely. It had certainly been a brief encounter! This of course meant that we could now leave happy and we packed up and left. Again there was no sign of any Willow Tits on the way back to the car, so we'd been very lucky at the hide. Back at the car it was 2.34pm so we headed off for our next stop, hoping that we could find a nearby WC.

We arrived at Carlingwark Loch at 2.51pm and unbelievably all the public toilets were locked up and had boards over the windows....Great! Again we had to get our bearings, as it looked totally different without the deep snow that'd covered the area last time we'd been there. We reckoned that the walk to the hide should at least be easier than last time but it was actually harder! Ok there wasn't 1ft of snow to plough through but this time the path was very flooded and extremely muddy! There were fishermen dotted around and Dog walkers, who were all very sensibly wearing wellies. We squelched our way through, skirting around the worst bits the best we could, until we got to the hide. We sat down and scanned through the ducks, which were absolutely miles away, just like last time.



The ducks are all right at the back!

Having not seen Little Grebe at all by then Wendy set about finding one, as if there wasn't any there then surely we'd struggle anywhere else? I set about going through the tiny dots that were ducks in the distance. After a while we could faintly make out some white on a tiny duck and reckoned it had to be our bird, so I took a shot and zoomed in. Yey! It was indeed our target bird and yet again we had a pretty poo view of a **Smew**. One day we'll get a decent view surely?



Smew (ish)

Wendy then found a **Little Grebe** in amongst the reeds at the waters edge....Phew! We'd practically given up on seeing one of them at all. With both of us still bursting for the loo we didn't hang around and headed back through the muddy puddles to the car. By the time we'd got back my shoes were absolutely soaked through and caked in mud. I'd have to sort that out before we went out for tea!

At 3.50pm we left and we'd run out of possible places to go. We still had to go home and pack, have baths, go out for tea, leave the cottage and get to Heysham for our return sailing. It was a very strange feeling for me knowing that I'd be back at work the next morning and that the holiday would be just a dim and distant memory. Our plan was to stay at the cottage for as long as possible and just drive straight to Heysham, so we still had bags of time to chill out. As we still had a little bit of time left I noticed that Threave was nearby and the book said Red Squirrels visit the feeders by the car park. We thought we might as well give it a go for a last ditch attempt and hopefully we'd finally find some toilets.

We arrived at Threave Estate Visitor Centre at 3.55pm and we saw a sign for toilets. We also noticed that the info board said it shut at 4pm.....Nooooooooo! We got out of the car and made a beeline for the Visitor Centre behind 2 other people, who were also going in late. As we entered a very narky woman, who worked there, told us that it was just about to close and asked what we were there for. Wendy told her that we were only there to look for Red Squirrels at the feeders but the woman's face was enough to stop a clock! She then said that the gardens were open 24hrs a day, so we could go through but she was very rude and seemed less than keen to let us in. Wendy was fuming at the way we'd just been spoken to and wanted to leave, never to return again. If the gardens

are open 24hrs then what was her problem? I thought we might as well have a wander, seeing as we were there and we walked outside into the huge estate. I'm sure the gardens look fantastic in summer but at 4pm in March it didn't seem so appealing.



Weird Threave house

Strangely, there were midgies everywhere, clouds of them and no sign of any feeders so we walked straight back to the car park. When we got back at 4.06pm we were horrified to find that the toilets had already been locked up for the night.....Grrrrrrr! With hindsight we should've just used the loos when we'd arrived and not bothered going into the gardens but we weren't to know. It was a good job we weren't too far away from the cottage!

It was 4.24pm when we got back and after a race to the bathroom I got the log burner going and went outside to wash my filthy and soaking shoes. While I was busy inside thinking of ways to dry my shoes Wendy was in the garden. Suddenly there was a knock on the glass and she very casually said, "Stoat." I was like, "WHAT?" but she then said that it must've been a Weasel, as it was tiny and she was sure it had a white tip to its tail. Weasel would just be too good, so she was seriously, doubting herself and with her very brief view and having only seen one Weasel before, she just couldn't decide. She finally settled on Weasel and sat inside by the window intently with her camera for about 15mins waiting for it to pop out from behind the bush it'd gone behind. It'd clocked her probably before she even knew it was there so she was just about to give up when it reappeared and bounced off down towards the stream :). It all happened so fast that she didn't get a better view and was still none the wiser. She sat there for a while longer and then gave up.

After I'd given my boots a blast with Wendy's hairdryer she suggested putting them on top of the log burner to try and dry them out a bit more but soon changed her mind when she imagined the melted mess it could create, so I put them in front of it instead. We needed to get a move on if we wanted to get some food, so Wendy went off to get changed in the bedroom. She still had one eye on the window though and wasn't willing to let it go without having a definite ID. All of a sudden I heard, "Pete.....get in here.....NOW!" She'd seen it again in the gap between the stream and the bush it'd hidden behind before and this time it had something in its mouth. She said, "It's got something and has to go back the way it came, so it'll go across the steps again." We waited patiently again and eventually it appeared, looked at us through the window and ran for it! Wow!

We both squealed, "**Weasel!**" in total disbelief as it ran across the top of the steps with a tiny shrew hanging lifeless in its mouth. What a brilliant end to our trip and not only that but if anyone had asked us to put money on the table as to whether we'd see either Stoat or Weasel we'd have said, "No way!" Of course we'd have lost our money, as we'd now seen not just one of them but both :). That was a real highlight for both of us and freaky as well, as while we'd been walking in Carstramon Wood that morning, Wendy had said how good it looked for Weasel. I'd agreed but we both just accepted that we'd probably never see one again in our lifetimes after our experience at Titchwell. Luckily we'd been wrong but we never have dreamt that we'd have Weasel as a garden tick! Feeling very pleased with her amazing find Wendy put the 2hr boost switch on for her bath and we headed out for tea at 5.30pm.

Wendy didn't want to go back to The Ship again as there was only 1 thing she could have and she fancied something different. I'd really liked it in there so wasn't impressed, as there's only 2 other Pubs to choose from and I didn't like the look of either. Firstly we pulled up outside the Murray Arms but it was in darkness and looked like it was closed. Another car pulled up next to us with some quite posh looking people who were also going there, so we thought it must be OK. We looked at the menu outside to make sure there was something we could both have and wandered in. Inside it was like an abandoned Hotel and smelled damp, so we started to regret our move. A girl in uniform appeared from the top of the long corridor and looked at us like we were aliens, so Wendy was the 1st to speak and asked her about food. The others were looking as confused as us especially when the girl said, "The Chefs not here yet, if I phone him it'll take him 20mins to get here and when he does it'll take at least 15mins for the ovens to heat up." How bizarre. Hmmmmmm the decision was easy.....run!

Next up was the Masonic Arms, which looked a bit rough but judging by the amount of people in there it was very popular. We looked at the menu inside but there was nothing for either of us. Neither of us were particularly bothered by that point and we headed straight back to The Ship, where I'd wanted to go all along. We went in and as the Landlord took us over to the same table by the fire he said, "You've come back, so we must be doing something right although god knows what!" We laughed while we sat down and he said, "Is it the same again, Rose Spritzer and a Coke?" Blimey talk about great customer service! Again it was totally dead but relaxing with a warm and cosy feel to it....Happy days :) Wendy wasn't inspired and didn't want the same as she'd had 2 nights ago, so went for a side salad and a portion of fries whereas I came out of it well and chose Spaghetti with Meatballs and some Onion Rings. After that I ordered the same Pudding as I'd had before just because it was so nice :). On the way home we were surprised to see a Moth in the car headlights, as we'd thought it was far too cold for any to be out.

Back at the Cottage it was 7.15pm, so Wendy didn't have too long to wait for the water to heat up for her bath. I got the log burner blazing away and we carried on as normal, watching TV and chilling out. This made things feel even more weird for me, to think that at 9am the next morning I'd be back at work! :(After watching Top Gear, packing all our stuff and tidying the cottage up we left at 9.45pm for the journey back to Heysham.

Typical of our luck it had just started to rain heavily as we left but even so it was still 8c and we saw another Moth! The roads between Dumfries were dark and narrow and there were no cat's eyes either, which made it worse. The rain was heavy by then and we had to take a diversion through Dumfries and found

ourselves stopped at some temporary traffic lights. A little **Mouse** ran across the road in front of us and vanished into a pile of sandbags just before the lights changed. We thought, "Phew!" but as they changed to green and the traffic started to move it ran back out and started heading back across the road, straight through the traffic.....Uh oh! We just hoped that it was quick enough and small enough to have made it back unscathed :(.

The rest of the drive was boring and non eventful and with some time to kill we came off the motorway early to go via Morecambe. It was quite quiet and with the exception of some crazy people on push bikes the only other people we saw were 2 tramps standing in a shop doorway holding cans of beer. I say they were standing but they were so drunk that they actually looked as though they were dancing....very badly! They could hardly stand up! As my Sat Nav had been quite rubbish again on this trip I decided to use my in built nav skills instead. This was a mistake and we got quite lost in the middle of Morecambe...Hahahaha. Thank god it wasn't in the middle of the day or I'd have been stressing big time. Eventually we worked our way out of the stupid Morecambe road system and we headed off towards Heysham. As we passed Asda I stopped to fill the car up with petrol and there was another Manx car there with the same idea. After that I found the parking disk from the cottage in my door pocket....Ooops! It was absolutely throwing it down by then but for the 1st time in ages it wasn't windy for our sailing...Phew!

Monday 10th March

We arrived at Heysham at 12.29am and waited until we boarded at 1.29am. When we'd got into our cabin we were both desperate for the loo and being a disabled cabin we had a shared toilet again. The light wasn't on to say it was occupied, so cautiously I opened the door only to find a bloke standing there in front of the toilet :O! Arrghhhhhh! I apologised profusely, as that's my biggest nightmare with the disabled cabins but it wasn't my fault, he should've locked it! We both stood there hopping from foot to foot for ages while he and his wife, in turn, proceeded to leisurely brush their teeth. Eventually they left and the loo was free but while Wendy was in there a member of staff walked straight into our cabin, said, "Sorry!" and left! What the....? After that we got into our beds and slept until my alarm went off. Not long after we'd been woken up came the announcement for vehicle drivers and their passengers to go to their cars. We disembarked at 5.54am and were home by 6.09am to a very cold house indeed. I put the heating on and Wendy went upstairs to unpack while the house heated up.

Wendy had taken the day off work, so she was planning on going back to bed while I had to get ready for work :(. I was totally zonked but had no choice and I felt very jealous when at 8am she said she'd warmed up and was off to bed. She didn't sleep well though because she kept dreaming that Lyca was jumping on the bed to wake her up...Hahahaha! She must've been looking forward to seeing her so much that she was dreaming about it! Luckily her Mum had kindly offered to keep her until lunchtime after she'd taken both Dogs for a walk, so she had plenty of time to recover.

Although it'd only been a very short trip it had been well worth it and definitely worth doing again. We'd managed to clock up a total of 621miles on my poor car, which came home absolutely filthy! The weather had been unbelievably kind to us and none of the trip had been ruined, by the forecasted rain, apart from on the drive up there and back down to Heysham. Jammy or what? We ended our trip on 98 birds, tantalizing close to the magic triple figures but still a

decent effort :). We missed some shocking stuff like Meadow Pipit, Redpoll, Snipe, Kestrel, etc etc but as we weren't there on a ticking fest we weren't disappointed.

I can see D&G being very good in summer for things like Redstarts, Wood Warblers and Flycatchers not to mention some special Dragon and Butterflies so my next plan is to look at a long weekend in summer. It's definitely doable and having to only drive 2 hours to the boat was a real treat compared to the usual 6-10 hour journeys we usually do.

Bird List

| | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Mute Swan | Shag | Duncock |
| Whooper Swan | Little Egret | Robin |
| Pink-footed Goose | Grey Heron | Stonechat |
| White-fronted Goose | Red Kite | Blackbird |
| Greylag Goose | Sparrowhawk | Fieldfare |
| Canada Goose | Buzzard | Song Thrush |
| Barnacle Goose | Merlin | Redwing |
| Brent Goose | Moorhen | Mistle Thrush |
| Shelduck | Coot | Goldcrest |
| Wigeon | Oystercatcher | Long-tailed Tit |
| Gadwall | Ringed Plover | Blue Tit |
| Teal | Golden Plover | Great Tit |
| Green-winged Teal | Lapwing | Coal Tit |
| Mallard | Black-tailed Godwit | Willow Tit |
| Pintail | Curlew | Nuthatch |
| Shoveler | Redshank | Treecreeper |
| Tufted Duck | Turnstone | Jay |
| Scaup | Black-headed Gull | Magpie |
| Eider | Common Gull | Jackdaw |
| Common Scoter | Lesser Black-backed Gull | Rook |
| Goldeneye | Herring Gull | Carrion Crow |
| Smew | Great Black-backed Gull | Raven |
| Red-breasted Merganser | Razorbill | Starling |
| Goosander | Black Guillemot | House Sparrow |
| Pheasant | Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon | Tree Sparrow |
| Red-throated Diver | Woodpigeon | Chaffinch |
| Great Northern Diver | Collared Dove | Greenfinch |
| Little Grebe | Great Spotted Woodpecker | Goldfinch |
| Great Crested Grebe | Skylark | Siskin |
| Slavonian Grebe | Rock Pipit | Linnet |
| Gannet | Grey Wagtail | Bullfinch |
| Cormorant | Pied Wagtail | Yellowhammer |
| | Wren | Reed Bunting |