

## Scotland - March 2013

After having bagged all 3 of our biggies on our 2 previous trips to Scotland we realized, not that we hadn't tried, that we still hadn't seen an Otter or White-tailed Eagle. With no holidays planned until our Hebrides trip in May we were chomping at the bit to get off the bird-less island and see something good so we set about planning a return visit. We knew that we'd be taking a gamble by going in March again and weren't expecting to be basking in temperatures of 24C, like last year, but if we went early enough the Cresties would still be feeding low down and in gardens so the possibility of getting a decent shot was on the cards. We also might be able to see the place in a different light, covered in snow and looking more like it should do so early in the year. Yet again we'd left it too late to have the pick of the best accommodation available but I stumbled across a small cottage, which backed onto Abernethy forest and looked like a perfect spot. It looked pretty old school and there wasn't any Wifi so although we'd be sacrificing luxury for location we'd still be in Nethy Bridge, which is near to all the places we wanted to go and also the civilization of Aviemore. We decided to book ourselves into the Dumfries and Galloway Travelodge again so not only could we get some sleep after getting off the boat at nearly midnight but we'd also have the next day to leisurely make our way up North.

As our trip drew closer we weren't worried at all until the forecast started showing heavy snow and sub zero temperatures in the Cairngorms. Not wanting this to affect our holiday I decided to prepare for the worst and ordered us a few bits and bobs including some heated hand and foot pads. I knew that we'd need them and Wendy was very pleased when they arrived, as her chilblains would need all the help they could get. She was however, slightly unnerved to see the pack of emergency foil blankets and a foldable snow shovel to keep in the car and thought that I'd either finally lost the plot or knew something she didn't! The sea had been flat calm for weeks but the day before we were due to go it was forecasting severe gales, which would run into the day after our sailing, so the likelihood of our boat going was looking increasingly slim.....Uh oh!

All we could do was keep an eye on the forecasts and cross our fingers that they were wrong but on the Thursday morning, as predicted, the wind was horrendous and all the boats were cancelled. The Steam Packet website was showing the same for the next day right up until our sailing.....maybe we would still be alright? Meanwhile, up in Nethy Bridge the temperatures were at best 0C (although feeling like -9C taking wind chill into account) but from Sunday it looked as though the snow was going to stop until it started again on the Friday. Not only that but there were no reports in Scotland on BirdGuides so our hopes of maybe twitching a few rarities were fading fast. Arrgghhhhhhhh! To add insult to injury the forecast was predicting heavy snow for Scotland on the day we would be travelling up there. Unbelievable! Our run of bad luck with holidays was continuing before we'd even set off.

### Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> March

When we woke up all we could hear was the wind battering the house so things weren't looking good. Imagine our horror when we peered outside to find that it was also snowing and sticking too! The Steam Packet website was still showing the same with all sailings cancelled, apart from ours at 7.45pm, and wouldn't be announcing any further plans until 5pm! Looking outside any idiot could see

that it wasn't fit to go anywhere never mind being on a boat in the middle of the Irish Sea so we pretty much resigned ourselves to the fact that we'd be missing the 1<sup>st</sup> day of our holiday. The weather in Dumfries and Galloway looked so bad that we probably wouldn't have been able to get to any of the places we wanted to visit anyway. Bearing all this in mind we had no choice but to see the whole fiasco as a blessing in disguise. Wendy was pretty gutted about wasting a day of her holidays from work but I was very happy because at lunchtime my bosses took the brilliant decision to shut shop and let us all go home....happy days :).

I'd tried to change our tickets the day before but the difference in price was £100, which meant I'd had to wait till the 5pm announcement on the actual day of our sailing. I was very worried about this, as I could see that all the cabins would definitely be booked up by the people moved from the previous 2 days sailings. At about 1pm, with the wind speed still at Gale force 9 and not dropping, I decided to have another look online and was over the moon to be allowed to amend our ticket to the Saturday night and that there was still 2 cabins left. They were disabled cabins though complete with shared toilet but I couldn't grumble, as all I wanted to do was to be able to put my head down during the rough crossing. I found out later, after the Steam Packet had officially announced the sailing had been cancelled, that all the cabins had gone. Phewwwww! Unfortunately we'd lost our £27 for the room at Travelodge and had to pay £40 for a room for the next night and this time I paid the £1.50 cancellation insurance just in case we were stuck again. All we could do was sit at home and wait to see what would happen..... :/.

Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> March

When I woke up at 5.30am all I could think about was whether the boat was going to sail so I couldn't go back to sleep. I dozed until 6.45am when I finally had to get up to tentatively look outside and check the weather. It had snowed again over night and the wind was showing a force 8 gusting 9, a slight drop from yesterday but surely still too much? By that point we should've been waking up in Dumfries and Galloway, filling our boots with Red Kites, Smews and Willow Tits whilst heading up to Nethy Bridge, not still at home wondering if it was going to happen at all. I looked on the Steam Packet website expecting the worse and although all the Manannan sailings to Liverpool had been cancelled the Ben-my-Chree was back in action and the morning sailing to Heysham was on....thank god we weren't on it though! I knew from constantly watching the weather forecasts over the past 24 hours that if the morning one went then ours would be going as all forecasts showed a slight drop in wind speed and swell later in the day.

After a VERY long day, looking at weather forecasts, Douglas Bay webcams and out the window, we were finally able to pack the car up and head down to the Sea Terminal. Although all the weather station websites were showing a lower wind speed from the morning (37 knots to 35 knots) it appeared to be gusting harder than at any other point that day but you can't argue with science. Hmmm.....unless you're a Scientologist or Creationist that is! To say that we set out reluctantly would be an understatement but if we didn't we'd lose a lot of money as well as our holiday so we had no other option. Wendy had dosed herself up with appropriate pills but as usual I'd had to avoid anything that could make me tired before the drive up to the Travelodge. Urrghhhh! I crossed my fingers that I'd be able to handle the rough crossing but more to the point....could

our neighbours? I really didn't fancy fighting over 1 toilet with 2 strangers or having to resort to a sick bag in the cabin!

We arrived at the Sea Terminal at 7.05pm and couldn't believe our eyes when we saw how busy the car park was. Wendy, getting her priorities in order, ran straight into Costa to get a coffee, while we sat in the car waiting to board and in the dark we saw our first bird of the trip, **Herring Gull**. Wendy started to panic slightly when she noticed the boat bobbing about like a cork in the dock and the cars rocking and rolling all around us. As we boarded at 8.12pm she'd have gladly turned around and gone home instead of enduring what was looking like her worst crossing to date. Having just washed my car I breathed a sigh of relief when I was instructed to park inside, as usually I draw the short straw and end up outside right next to the funnel.

The boat was packed to the hilt and definitely the busiest either of us had ever seen it so having a cabin was a real bonus. Having just drunk a huge cappuccino Wendy cautiously knocked on the toilet door to check it was empty. How embarrassing would it be to walk in on someone by mistake? There was no sign of life inside so after I'd worked out how to use the confusing lock system in she went. Don't ask me how she'd managed it but when she came out the door indicator was still saying, "occupied" and showed no sign of budging. We were worried that next door wouldn't be able to get in and couldn't for the life of us work out how to get open it again. I gave it five minutes to see if the auto lock would disengage but it didn't, so I made the decision to ring the 'help' button. Typically, seconds later the light on the door lock went out.....Urrghhhhhh. All we had to do was sit there awkwardly and await the unfortunate staff member to appear and help us out. The knock on our door was quick to follow and with red faces we had to explain that we thought we'd broken the door but actually hadn't. Oooooops! Panic over the Captain made his speech and announced that the crossing was going to be exactly what you'd expect in a gale force 8.....Brilliant! We set off at 8.30pm and were preparing ourselves for the worst, like you would. Imagine our total surprise when the boat quite smoothly sailed out of Douglas and was on its way. I could only come to the conclusion that due to the boat being so full and also our cabin being in the middle of the vessel it was less affected by the waves. The entire crossing was very comfortable and we even managed to get an hour or so sleep in, so we'd been worried about nothing all along. Phew!

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> March

After waking up just before docking at Heysham we disembarked at 1.05am and Wendy confused me slightly by not going to the café for a coffee...very strange.



Coffeeless at Heysham

We'd arrived 1hr 20mins later than normal so we were already behind schedule but at 1.05am we set off to get up to Dumfries as quickly as possible for some sleep. Although I'd initially worried about my new Sat Nav (Sygic on a Google Nexus 7) it seemed to be working a treat and even the dimmer function on the screen looked really good and wasn't blindingly bright in the dark. By the time we'd hit Scotland at 2.31am we started to notice the thick snow at the side of the roads and wondered if it was bad enough to put a spanner in the works for our first plan of the day. It was 2.50am when we finally arrived at the Travelodge and as we unpacked the car we heard **Rooks** up in the trees somewhere nearby. The room was nice and clean and more importantly lovely and warm so after dumping our stuff we went out like lights!

At 8am I woke up bright as a button and raring to get going, even though I'd probably only had 4 1/2hrs sleep! Wendy woke up shortly after but due to her concoction of drugs the night before she was slightly less spritely! Eventually, and like a bear with a sore head, at 8.45am she managed to drag herself out of the nice warm bed to get ready. Getting ready was a major task, layer upon layer of clothes to make sure we'd be warm enough. I don't think we could've fitted anything else under our coats or trousers and we could hardly move! Yet again Costa next door wasn't open until 11am so she had to make do with what was in the room but when she went out to the car to get a cereal bar each for breakfast she brought back a sachet of hot chocolate for me.....yum yum. From the room and car park we were hoping to get our trip list up and running and straight off we saw **House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Collared Dove, Blackbird, Great Tit, Woodpigeon, Starling, Song Thrush** and a **Great Black-backed Gull**. The Rooks were busy nest building but things were very quiet compared to the same week last year when we'd already seen all sorts including Yellowhammer and Chiffchaff.

After loading the car up we set off at 9.58am for our first stop of the day and in the light of day we could now see the deep snow that had been in the news. This was slightly worrying as I didn't know if I'd be able to access our only 2 stop off points to break up the long drive I had ahead of me. It was worth a shot though and the main roads were all clear so I stuck to my plan and hoped for the best. Not far up the road we saw **Carrion Crow** and on the River Nith was **Grey**

**Heron, Mute Swan and Cormorant.** Our first mammal tick was a couple of stupid **Rabbits** fighting right at the side of the road.....not a good idea! When I spotted a speed camera I realized that my new Sat Nav had decided not to audibly warn me about it, there was just a little icon on the map.....not that I was speeding of course! Needing both my eyes on the road I had to pull over to sort it out before going any further. Having not seen any yet this year, back at home, we were pleased to see our 1<sup>st</sup> **Common Buzzard** soaring overhead. The temperature was only 2.5C and all the small roads branching off the main ones were caked in snow, which wasn't what I'd wanted to see but by then I'd gone too far to change my plan. Heading towards a small Loch there was about 3 Military trucks parked up in a layby and as we grew closer we could see that was a group of Ghurka's. Military tick! :). On the Loch itself were **Goldeneye** and **Black-headed Gulls** and further up the road 2x **Common Snipe** lifted up and flew over us.

By the time we'd reached Castle Douglas the snowdrifts were higher than the car but fortunately it was a clear and sunny day. We found the Lochside Park we were aiming for but the small road down to it was caked in snow and ice and was pretty lethal. My car handled it well though (or was it my expert driving skills :P) and we parked up at Carlingwark Loch 10.31am, where we were hoping to get a lifer for Wendy.



Carlingwark Loch

The snow was really deep and the walk was longer than we'd both expected but it was a nice area so we were looking forward to checking it out. A quick scan from the car revealed **Moorhen, Coot**, more **Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Snipe, Common Gull, Redwing, Little Grebe** and a pair of **Goosanders**. As we crunched our way through the snow towards the footpath, saying how glad we were of all our layers of clothing, something caught my eye. Another bird we hadn't expected to see, a **Kingfisher** whizzing off from a perch nearby. We could hear the chirping of birds, behind us in a bush at the waters edge and when we got our bins onto them we couldn't believe what we were seeing. Not only were there **Goldfinch** and **Siskin** in there but amongst them were at least 50x **Brambling**! This was such a rare sight that we just had to stop to try for what should have been our best ever Brambling shot. Our cameras were going mental but typically the birds weren't in the clear as often as we'd



have liked....Grrrrrr! We hung around, possibly for too long until, our fingers were painfully numb but we were happy enough that we'd both got something decent, with Wendy getting the nicer shot.



Brambling

Carrying on along the path the snow was getting deeper and walking was increasingly hard going due to us both feeling really tired from lack of sleep. We picked up **Robin, Dunnock, Wren, Coal Tit, Blue Tit** and **Long-tailed Tit** on the way and approaching the Hide the snow was nearly knee deep in places!



Path to Hide

Finally we made it into the Hide so we sat down to scan through the very distant Ducks sitting on the water. Our first few scans came out negative so we started to wonder if the bird had cleared off, which would be just about right for us now

our Jinx status had been reinstated! There was a **Meadow Pipit** and **Pied Wagtail** and Wendy spotted a pair of **Great-crested Grebes**, which were displaying but I had my eye on something else. It was much smaller than all the others and its features seemed right so I got Wendy onto it as well. We both watched it until we were happy to call **Smew**, which was Wendy's 1<sup>st</sup> lifer of the trip :). It felt like a lifer for me too as I've only ever seen one Smew before when I was a kid so I can't really remember it. Obviously I tried to get a record shot of it, which was yet another of my National Geographic standard shots :/. Annoyingly it should have been at least sharp as the focus was bang on it but the 1.4tc combo on my 500mm lens just hasn't been playing recently. Booo :(.



National Geographic Smew photo

From the Hide alone were at least 12x Little Grebes, that we could see, and a couple of them were fishing just outside but the light was terrible so getting any decent shots was impossible. The Smew was swimming even further away and we'd already been there way too long so we headed off back to the car.

It was 12.25pm when we left for our next stop and the snow was fortunately becoming less and less the further north we drove. We didn't have to wait long before we saw our 1<sup>st</sup> **Red Kite** of the trip followed by another and then another, which is always nice to see. We also saw a **Sparrowhawk** zooming towards some trees at the top of a field and **Pheasants** on the way. By the time I'd turned off the main road and was aiming for our next stop we'd seen 9x Red Kites and Wendy was determined to get a shot of one while she had the chance. Having failed last year she knew how hard it would be but she gave it her best shot and considering the terrible light this one came out very well!



Red Kite

We arrived at Ken-Dee Marshes at 12.45am and although the single lane track had accumulated a generous covering of snow it was doable (with some Top gear style POWER to smash through some of the deeper bits) but the car park was a different kettle of fish. Wendy hopped out of the car to gauge how deep it was so I knew if I could get the car in or not. It looked much too deep but there was nowhere else to park, which was a big problem. If I couldn't park up we'd have to forget the plan and would potentially be missing out on some great stuff we wouldn't find elsewhere. There was no way round it and our hearts sank.....until a farmer in his tractor chugged up next to us and asked, "Are you stuck?". Wendy quickly replied and told him that we fine but were just hoping to park up in the car park. The farmer said, "Give me a minute" and proceeded to clear not just a space for us but the entire car park until there was no snow left at all. It was a good job I hadn't tried to get in there as you can see the depth of the snow in the picture below. Wow! What an extremely nice man :).





Nice farmer man

After thanking him profusely we drove in and he carried on up the track. We couldn't believe how helpful he'd been, after all it was RSPB land and not his own so he was under no obligation to do so. By then we were getting quite hungry but we had to make do with some more very cold water and a couple of Mentos to keep us going for the time being. It was absolutely freezing and looking at the snowy track ahead of us it felt like a good time to change into my snow boots.



Ken-Dee Marshes path

We finally set off on our walk at 1.10pm adding **Reed Bunting** and a very noisy **Jay** to our list, as we approached the woodland area we'd pin pointed for Nuthatch. There was no sign of our bird but we had another Red Kite go over us before we eventually got to the Hide. We'd also bargained on Red Squirrel somewhere around the area of the feeding stations but we were disappointed by not seeing even one. We sat down and kept our eyes peeled for our main target bird, Willow Tit. Surely every bird would be making use of the free food while the snow and freezing temperatures were putting them at such a disadvantage? The feeders were teeming with vast numbers of all the usual suspects and this allowed us some good opportunities to get some pics while we waited.....and



waited. There was a male **Great Spotted Woodpecker** hanging about, which I managed to get a shot of.



Great Spotted Woodpecker

Eventually I spotted a very nice **Nuthatch**, which came down to the peanut feeders then cleared right off so we couldn't get any pics of that...Grrrrrrr! I had a quick flick through the Visitor's Book and noticed there'd been no recent reports of our target bird either, so we began to get worried about them. Had they too had a disastrous year last year with all the terrible weather we'd had? Hoping that wasn't the case I had a quick scan of the Loch edges and picked up 6x Common Snipe.



Loch Ken

In the end our fingers were really painful with the cold and the clock was ticking so we packed up and headed back.

We walked very quickly to try to warm ourselves up but we were still keeping our wits about us for anything that moved. As we approached our Nuthatch spot from the year before we stopped for a last look just in case there was anything else about. It's a good job we did when Wendy said, "Eee arr, up there." I raised my bins and we were both very pleased to finally see a **Willow Tit** feeding high up in the branches of a tree :). We'd have put money on them being at the feeders but this one thankfully seemed to be doing OK on its own in the woods. We watched it for ages picking at the moss and even managed to get some decent shots, even though we were shooting up at a completely vertical angle!



Willow Tit

When we were both happy with what we'd taken we carried on, seeing **Greylag Geese** in the fields to our left. Back at the car it was 2.45pm and we were now starving so we cracked open some crisps and the biscuits we'd stashed from the boat. We were still the only nutters there so it was the ideal time to have a WC break before setting off again.....Phew!

After I'd changed back into my normal shoes for driving in we left at 2.53pm with the longest stretch of the journey still ahead of us. The next birds we saw were **Stock Dove** and then we passed a small Loch with a field of **Oystercatchers** nearby. When we'd planned our trip we'd calculated our time of arrival in Aviemore and worked out that we'd still have time to go shopping for food, as Tesco is open until 10pm. Wendy had just had a brainstorm and realized that (as our boat had been cancelled) it was actually Sunday so Tesco would close early and we'd be stuffed.....Uh oh! We'd have nothing in for our tea that evening, nothing for breakfast or making lunch with the next day and no milk for tea and coffee! We could pick up milk and bread easy enough but we weren't so sure about the rest and decided to cross that particular bridge later on.....much later



on! I also needed petrol so our first priority was to find the nearest garage before my car ran out of juice somewhere in the middle of nowhere surrounded by snow! The presence of the snow certainly made for some stunning views though, which were totally different to the past 2 trips up there.



Not sure where!

We passed a red van abandoned in a large roadside ditch, which looked like the driver had lost control and skidded off the road and saw our 1<sup>st</sup> **Magpie**. Soon to follow were a couple of **Red-legged Partridge** crossing the road in front of us, **Jackdaw**, **Kestrel** and another **Red Kite** just below Glasgow. Eventually at 4.53pm we saw a sign for petrol and a Costa at Hamilton Services so I pulled in. Disappointingly it turned out that there was no petrol or decent Coffee (Costa Express...bleurrghhhh!) so I quickly carried on. Further along we did catch a brief glimpse of a **Merlin** bombing past over the fields though, which was unexpected.

At 5.15pm we were at Stirling Services and in desperate need of a break too so I parked up. The first thing we noticed was a field with about 40x **Lapwing** feeding in it and Wendy ran in for a WC break and a much-needed visit to Costa. My eyes lit up when she emerged with not just a coffee but also a brown paper bag :). My heart instantly sank when she opened it revealing a minuscule small portion of fries.....to share! Ah well, I'm on a diet and they're not exactly very healthy but they did hit the spot and would tide us over until we could hopefully get something proper later. After that I drove round to the petrol station to fill my car up and we continued our journey at 5.43pm seeing **Curlew** flying over.

Shortly after it started snowing quite heavily and as well as starting to get dark the temperature in my car was reading 0C. I didn't fancy getting stuck in it much so it was a good job I'd bought some foil blankets and a fold down snow shovel after all! :P. We'd ended up on the Perthshire Tourist Route by accident, which took us off the A9 and bypassed Perth. Luckily it turned out that I'd actually planned to go this way to reach a road further north and we had no idea that the scenery was going to be so amazing.





Perthshire Tourist Route

We passed a very Regal looking Red Deer Stag with 2x females standing up on the snowy mountains, which was really cool and by then my car was reading -2. Brrrrrr!

We were heading for a road I'd been told about by a friend where there's Black Grouse but the light was fading fast so our window for visibility was closing in on us by the minute. Further along we spotted a Buzzard feeding on the ground in a field next to the road. Unfortunately I couldn't stop for pics and it flew off before I could park up safely so we'd missed out on another brilliant photo opportunity. Why are decent birds always next to blind bends in roads?!!! We weren't really expecting to see anything of interest at this point so we were totally gob smacked when a male **Black Grouse** flew over the road in front of us and disappeared over a ridge.....very nice. Next we had a pair of **Red Grouse** and then a real treat of a **Short-eared Owl** hunting over a very snowy field.....Wow! This was brilliant and we hadn't even reached our Black Grouse spot yet. When we did however, the small road was totally snowed up and I was pretty sure that, even though I'd gained tons of snow driving experience earlier in the day, taking on this road would be a step too far. We scrubbed it off our plan just incase we ended up getting stuck as it was getting late, colder and dark so we couldn't afford to loose any more precious time. We were happy enough to have seen Black Grouse over the road though and were planning to catch up with more at some point later on in our trip. We carried on and found some **Canada Geese** in what remained of the bird-able light hoping for the flash of a Barn Owl in the headlights or the call of a Tawny Owl on our way.

At 6.58pm we entered the town of Aberfeldy and Wendy shrieked, "Stop.....there's a Co-op!" As we had no food we had to grab any opportunity so I parked up, next to some scummy looking youths drinking alcopops outside the shop, and she went in to see what she could find. Expecting to only buy the very basics she was pleased to also find soya milk, both our breakfast cereals for the morning and some stuff for tea if we needed it.....sorted, panic over :). At 7.32pm we passed the sign for the Cairngorms so we'd broken the back of our journey and could start to relax. Wendy reckoned that instead of going straight to the cottage it would make more sense to stop off at Aviemore's Italian Restaurant 'La Taverna' and treat ourselves. After all we'd survived on next to

nothing all day and had been on the go since leaving the Travelodge that morning. It would be a nice way to celebrate the fact that we'd actually made it there, especially as my Dad and Wendy's Mum had advised us to cancel the trip completely as it would be too risky travelling up there! We also still had all our unpacking to do when we got there, needed baths and at least some time to chill out. I agreed that it was a good idea, although not ideal as we both looked a total mess and I didn't really want to leave my car full of hideously expensive equipment unattended!

Eventually we arrived in the car park at 8.22pm and after Wendy had reassured me that, "It'll be fine" and that, "Aviemore isn't the car crime capital of Scotland!" we hurried over the road in the snow, and into the restaurant. Fortunately they're not fussy about their clientele and showed us to our seats where Wendy was quick to order in the drinks. We were surrounded by people all dressed up for dinner but we'd gone past the point of caring and as we sat down in the warmth it felt like our holiday had just started. We shared a really nice authentic Italian pizza with a bowl of fries and Wendy's Rose spritzer was just what the Doctor ordered. I'd even made some room for pudding, which was a fancy Italian ice cream ball thing, so with some real food in us at last we paid up and left.

After a VERY long and tiring day we pulled up outside our HQ for the week 'Clunymhore' in Nethy Bridge at 9.20pm. It was still snowing lightly and we felt apprehensive to say the least as we opened the front door and peered inside. When we'd booked it there wasn't many photos of the interior, which made us wonder whether it was because the rooms not shown weren't very nice. We switched the lights on and I started to unload the car while Wendy took our bags through for unpacking. The house was really clean and lovely and warm, which was a massive relief as usually when we first arrive at a cottage it's absolutely freezing.



Kitchen

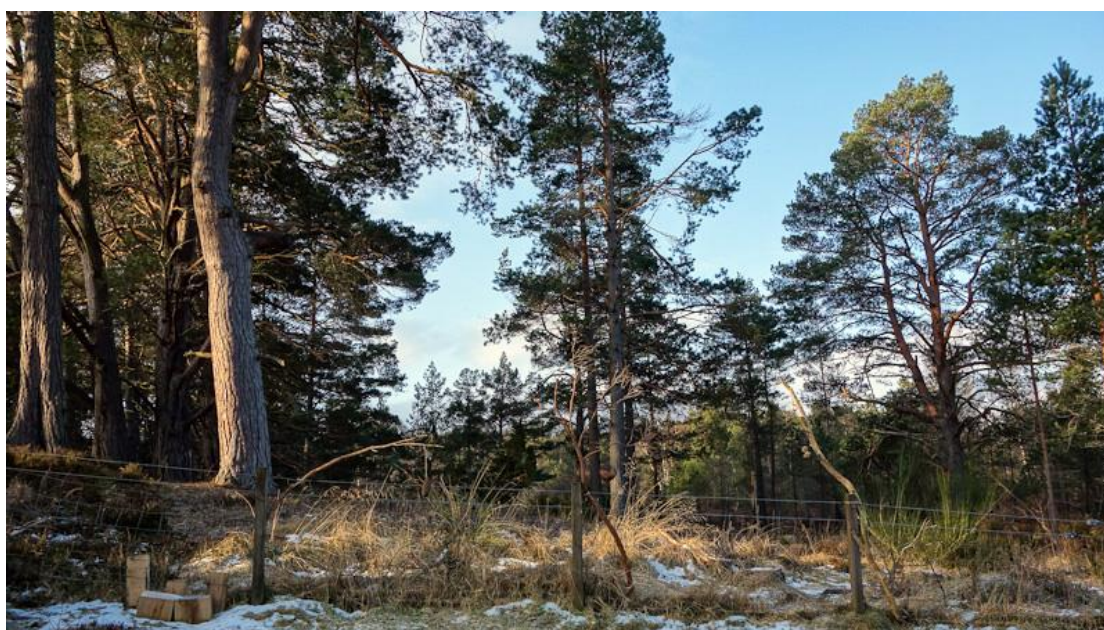
Wandering around and getting our bearings we were totally blown away by how nice the house was, so to say we were happy would be an understatement. Even in the dark we could see that we were surrounded by trees, so we couldn't wait to get up the next day in daylight to check out our garden and more to the point what we had visiting it!



After Wendy had put all our stuff away and had enjoyed a relaxing bath she poured herself a glass of wine and put her feet up. She phoned her Mum, who was very relieved to hear that we'd made it there OK, as the weather on TV had looked so bad. Unfortunately there was no landline or Wifi in the cottage but my Giffgaff pay as you go sim would solve that problem, as I had 300 free minutes airtime from my £10 top up :). Being prepared for everything we'd packed my electric blanket, incase it was a cold house, and even though it wasn't we thought we'd revel in the luxury anyway. There was a real fire in the living room, which we couldn't wait to get going but it was far too late in the day to even consider lighting. I don't know how we managed it but we stayed up until 11.30pm by which point we were ready to drop and staggered off to bed.....very thankful of the electric blanket :).

Monday 24<sup>th</sup> March

At 7.30am we were awake and dying to look outside but had no particular plans for the day ahead. It was a lovely sunny day, although very cold, and the garden and surrounding area was better than we'd imagined with partially stocked bird feeders hanging up around the house.



View from the back patio doors.

We'd brought a bag of peanuts with us, so my 1<sup>st</sup> job of the day was to fill them up, to attract the birds in. Unfortunately, looking into next doors garden it appeared that we had some major competition and that their bird banquet would take some beating. They had every type of bird feeder and food going and loads of them too so we were going to have to up our stakes and invest wisely if we were going to get what we wanted in ours. It was typical of our luck but it looked as though we'd booked the same week as 4x Birder/Photographers who were staying right next door :(. Saying that though, looking out of the patio doors at the back of the house, we were off to a good start with **Long-tailed Tit** on the fat balls already. We had **Mistle Thrush**, a **Raven** flying over and there were plenty of **Siskins** knocking about as well as **Song Thrush**, **Dunnock**, **Robin**, **Chaffinch** and even a visit from a **Treecreeper**. A Great Spotted Woodpecker could be heard drumming in the forest and made an occasional appearance in the trees at the back of next door. We had the usual common garden species and

all the Tits coming in, apart from the one we were after so we were beginning to become doubtful of them turning up at all.

Between trying to have breakfast, get dressed, pack lunch and get our gear together without missing anything in the garden it really was a hectic start to our 1<sup>st</sup> morning. Another problem we found was that we couldn't watch the feeder at the side of the house at the same time as the ones at the back, so we had to go between the two hopefully not missing anything. I decided to go into one of the bedrooms to have a look at next doors feeders to see how we were fairing. After a while my eyes nearly popped out of my head and I excitedly shouted to Wendy. Sure enough next door had the monopoly AND our 'most wanted' bird in their garden.....Urrghhhhh! Wendy came in for a look and a few minutes later the lovely little **Crested Tit** returned for more food. As always though, it was there and gone in the blink of an eye, they really are the fastest movers! I then spotted a **Red Squirrel** right up at the top of a tree but it was nowhere near the cottage. We were starting to get worried that having been duped by promises of Red Squirrel and Cresties in the garden of our last cottage, we'd be disappointed again.

After our crazy start we were ready to go at 9.40am, which was later than we'd expected but with so much going on the time had gone nowhere. Our first plan was to try for the reported Taiga Bean Goose, which had been seen with some Pinkfeet the day before. It was nearby so it wouldn't take us long to get there and it would also be a lifer for us both so well worth a shot.

We passed the old bridge where we always see Dipper, so at 9.46am we hopped out of the car for a quick look on the way.



River Spey

We scanned the river and there was no sign of the bird but Wendy spotted a wooden box on the other side floating on a platform at the waters edge. Her initial thought was Mink trap but after we'd scratched our heads we thought it was more likely to be a nest box for something, which could be vulnerable to flooding after last year's wash out summer, possibly a Goosander? There was also a new nest box attached to the bridge, which we reckon could've been for Goldeneye. It was brilliant to see how much effort someone was putting in up



there for the birds. We were just about to give up when Wendy shrieked, "**Dipper!**" Sure enough it had made a last minute show and whizzed up the river to land on a rock in the water. Yey! We'd both heard what sounded like it's alarm call, which was very different to the sweet song we'd heard it making in the same week last year. Last year they were already nesting under the bridge and we reckoned the young had fledged before we'd left. With all the snow and sub zero temperatures everything was happening later this year, which in theory should work to our advantage as far as Cresties were concerned. This wasn't good for our chance of any Ospreys or Slav Grebes returning at any time during the week.....but you never know.

After that we carried on to the road where the Geese were meant to be and having driven the length of it at snails pace finding nothing but 100's of Greylags we'd reached the end of the line.....Bummer! We stopped off in Carrbridge and when I saw a sign for a Coffee Shop at the side of the road Wendy jumped at the chance and nipped in to satisfy her craving for proper coffee. She already had a 2litre flask of the stuff with her but obviously you can't beat the real deal. When she went inside she was greeted (not) by a non-Scottish bloke who was very rude and unfriendly so she scrubbed it off her list of where to get coffee from. There was a gorgeous looking old stone bridge over the river (I'm assuming this was 'Carr Bridge') so while she drank her cappuccino in the car I hopped out to get a quick pic with my new 'point and click' camera.



Carr Bridge

As I was doing this we both heard a familiar sound so our eyes turned to the sky just as a Jet flew over.....always a pretty cool sight! When I got back to the car I had another look at the map on my Sat Nav and realized that we'd been looking on the wrong road for the Geese....Doh! Back on track we found the real Carr Road and joined a 3-car convoy in search of the rarity looking over vast fields, which looked really good for any wintering Geese.



Carr Road fields

Again there was nothing but Greylags but we did find 1x **Pink-footed Goose** amongst them. It looked as though yet again we'd been on another 'wild goose chase' :(.

Thinking ahead and being nearby we made a detour to the 'Heather Centre' where we picked up a Red Squirrel toy (for Wendy!) and a variety of bird food and another feeder to aid our Crestie luring competition with next door. We spent over £40 so we were obviously officially at war.....Hahahahaha :P. As we drove away down the forest lined road, armed with our ammo, Wendy squealed, "What the.....?" I screeched to halt wondering what on earth she'd seen. I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing and nearly split my sides when she said, "Uh, there's a Wallaby in there.....or maybe it's a Kangaroo.....back up, back up!!!" Now, I know that Scotland has some pretty awesome wildlife but Wallaby is definitely pushing it, never mind Kangaroo! I reversed up the road and while I was killing myself laughing Wendy relocated the beast and said "Oh it's a **Roe Deer.**" Through her tears of laughter and aching stomach she tried to explain that her head was still in the I.O.M and big long ears back at home mean Wallaby. That still doesn't explain her conclusion of Kangaroo though, but this would be handy ribbing material for the week! :D.

We were in need of a Red Squirrel fix so our next stop was the Boat of Garten feeders where we parked up at 11.44am. It came as no surprise to us that there wasn't a single Squirrel in sight and we wondered if it was going to be another one of 'those kind' of holidays. A Treecreeper, feeding on the ground at the base of the trees, kept us amused for a while and we got some pics, while we had such a great opportunity. I luckily got my best ever Treecreeper photo as I've always had a hard time with them back at home.



Treecreeper

With very little happening we didn't stick around for long and headed off for our next stop which was a totally new place for Caper recommended by the same friend who'd told us about the Black Grouse Road.

At 12.26pm we arrived in the car park feeling hungry so we ate our lunch of crisps and cereal bar (well we didn't have anything else!) before setting off on our walk. Worryingly, there was a sign next to the footpath warning people that wildlife cameras were in operation due to it being a sensitive area for Caper. Hmmmm.....this made us uneasy but we were sticking to the Caper code of conduct as always, which says to keep to the paths and not to enter Caper forests after 1<sup>st</sup> April during the morning.

The whole place looked amazing and we could see how it would be good for Capers but there was no sign of life and it was totally dead. At the end of the path was a junction so, using the OS map I'd loaded into my Nexus 7 tablet, I decided we needed to go left then right to reach the path we wanted. Having never been there before we had no idea where we were going and were beginning to doubt that we'd gone the right way. We were glad we'd maybe messed up though when Wendy spotted a male **Capercaillie** fly across the track ahead of us, which was closely followed by a female who'd seemingly launched herself out of the treetops.....Yey! :). Considering it was our 1<sup>st</sup> day we were pretty chuffed with that so we turned around and headed back down to where we'd turned off. I had another look at my digital map and realized we'd gone the wrong way, so we decided to walk the right hand section as well to see if we could find the right spot. We did wonder if we'd be pushing our luck having already seen what we'd set out to find already.





Caper Forest

All of a sudden we heard footsteps behind us and turned round to find a Photographer coming our way, so it was looking good for us now being on the right path. When he caught up with us he asked if we were after Caper and told us that 'He' hangs around either in the trees or at the end of the path out in the open and quickly went on to say that I certainly wouldn't need my big lens for pics. I already knew that after my friend's pictures had shown how curious that particular Caper could get but I had no choice as Wendy had my shorter 300mm lens on her camera. The worst-case scenario would be that I'd need to walk back a bit! :). Our optimism levels rose but after finding the said spot the other guy proceeded to walk off the path, up the bank and straight into the forest :O. This struck us as being bang out of order and as we had no intention of gatecrashing in the bird's territory we stayed put on the path. The guy (who looked like a Photographer we'd met in Norfolk at the Red-backed Shrike) charged his way through the trees but didn't appear to find anything either. We wanted to get ourselves away from the situation as quickly as possible so scurried off back to the car.

Back at the car we heard Cresties calling from the trees and there was a couple with 2 young kids getting ready for a walk. They went up the same track as we'd been on so we felt more confident that we'd not done anything wrong and that the signs must be left there all year, which is a bit stupid if you ask me. Surely they'd be better off following the RSPB, who's signs state the exact dates when you're not allowed to enter forests and also barricade off the sensitive areas so there's no room for confusion. Another car pulled up and a bloke stepped out and headed straight for us, asking if we were aware of the cameras in operation. I suppose he made a beeline for us, and not the family, because we were carrying cameras and undoubtedly some Photographers give the rest of us a bad name! We told him that we'd read the signs and said about the RSPB's rules. He seemed happy with what we'd said and we ended up having a lengthy conversation with him about what was about in the surrounding areas. He even showed us some of his Red Squirrel shots from earlier, which he'd taken from his brother's new hide up behind Aviemore somewhere. He told us that if we went there and told his brother we'd been talking to him then he'd probably let us in for cheap. Nice idea but we had no intention of paying for photo sessions at Hides, now that



would be cheating! We couldn't help but wonder if this guy, although very friendly, was bending the truth a bit though.

We left at 2.34pm and headed for Loch Insh where I had the full intention of paying the best cake shop in the world a visit on the way back. There was nothing at the Loch but we passed a playing field with 30+ Mistle Thrushes feeding on the ground, which made us think that maybe just maybe some kind of Thrush movement was happening.

At 3.05pm we parked up at Inschriac Nurseries and went straight into 'The Potting Shed' for a cake fix. Wendy was happy enough with a coffee but I wanted cake, chocolate cake (which has 4 bars of Lindt chocolate in it)...om nom nom :). I was also pleased to see that I could actually have a cup of tea for a change, as they had decaf tea in the cabinet. We sat by the long window at the back watching the bird feeders, which were busier than we'd ever seen them.



Inschriac Nurseries feeders

There was even a pair Woodpeckers this time, obviously this was due to the bad weather as well, but strangely there was no sign of any Red Squirrels :( . It was half term and unfortunately we had to endure the screaming brats that surrounded us, who were doing our heads in slightly to put it mildly. After we'd finished we walked back to the car with our only other plan being to go to Tesco and finally get some shopping in. The most offending child of the lot was standing by the stream being just as annoying as it had been in the café and as we passed it we both started laughing. Comparing notes it turned out that we'd both had the same thought of the child being a Rugby ball, perfect for a drop kick up the path back to its angry parents.....slightly worrying but it was hilarious at the time! :P.

We arrived at Tesco at 4pm and wandered around picking up random things to eat for the week and while we were in there, who should we bump into again but the guy from the Caper place! He stopped for another chat and was, to our relief, really friendly again and obviously loved his wildlife. Tesco was packed so we couldn't get out quick enough and just hoped that we hadn't forgotten something important so we didn't have to repeat the visit.

At 4.50pm we pulled into our HQ driveway and were pleased to see a Roe Deer in the trees behind the side of the house. It was very wary of us but when we were safely inside the house and no longer a threat, another one appeared....nice. We could also hear the Cresties calling, so at least we knew they were around somewhere. I filled up the feeders with our freshly bought goodies and this time I put something out that we hoped would bring something else entirely into our garden. One of the wildlife highlights in the advert for the cottage was that they'd had Pine Marten so we'd bought some eggs so to put out at night. All we had to do was wait till morning and if the egg had gone then we'd know if it would be worth our while sitting up for ½ the night to see if we could see one...simple :). Although Wendy thought it was too early I put an egg out on a tree stump anyway and was horrified when 5mins later a Rook swooped down and took it.....Doh! OK, so I'd leave it till later when they'd gone to roost.

After tea Wendy went off to soak in a hot bath while I set about lighting the fire....or trying to! I couldn't for the life of me get it going even after phoning my Mum for some advice. After trying everything possible we could only think that we'd have to buy some firelighters the next day and try again. This was quite disappointing, as we'd been looking forward to having a fire roaring away and kicking off its heat. From about 8pm we'd started to feel the effects of the past 2 days and were so zonked we were finding it hard to string a sentence together. Wendy poured herself a wine and phoned her Mum and judging by what she was saying the snow back at home was worse than up in the Highlands! As we had no Wifi we had no way of keeping up with local news events and had been blissfully unaware of the chaos it was causing on the west coast of the Island. We were lucky to have escaped when we did! Don't ask us how but we managed to stay up until 10.50pm by which point the electric blanket was beckoning and I reckoned that an early start was in order for the morning. We'd have to be up before the Rooks to find out if the egg had been taken and to see if the Cresties would be lured into our garden instead of next doors.

Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> March

The alarm went off at 6am and after we'd hauled ourselves out of bed like zombies we peered out through the curtains. Disappointingly the egg was still there uneaten so we had no evidence of any Pine Martens visiting us. It had snowed again overnight but only a light dusting and it felt extremely cold outside so the birds were all back happily filling up on our feeders. Next door were also up and about early and were already out in the garden wielding cameras but they also had pop up Hides set up in front of their feeders.....Grrrrrrr! Again we were torn between looking out the window and getting ourselves ready but while Wendy was in the kitchen making sarnies she saw a Crestie land on the feeder at the side of the house and shouted to me. I quickly crushed up some peanuts to put out for them if that was to be their preferred feeder. The Red Squirrel had also decided to pay us a visit too, which was looking very promising. As I was putting the nuts out a Crestie actually landed on the feeder right next to me. It was so close I could've touched it and it seemed to stay there for a long time so I was able to look right at it before it decided to fly off! That was a moment in my life I'd never have imagined happening and one, which I'll never forget I can tell you :). The Crestie showed no pattern in its behavior and used the feeders at the back of the house too, so we both positioned ourselves by the opened patio doors and waited and waited....and waited.



Living room

We were screwed if they kept returning to the side feeder, as a shot wasn't possible from there but if they came to the back we had a slight chance of them landing on the branches for a nano-second just before going onto the feeders. The only slight pattern we could see was that they certainly took their time in coming back to the feeders after they'd taken a nut away! Sitting at the opened door was proving to be extremely cold but the Crestie did indeed land on the branches at the back a few times.....to my joy. Unfortunately due to their speed and the very low light all the shots came out terrible. I even got Wendy to show me how she was holding her camera to see if that was her problem but it wasn't. When I looked I could find no logical reason why the shots were so bad so I investigated using liveview on the camera and found that there was some kind of strange air effect happening. I noticed that if I focused on the fence it would drift in and out of focus even without touching the camera! This was possibly from the snow on the ground evaporating and creating a type of heat haze effect. My best shot was this one but it had to be cropped out, as the detail just wasn't there.



Crested Tit

Now that we knew the birds would come to our garden we still had tomorrow to try again and we'd worked out that prime Crestie time appeared to be between 6.30-8.15am, so we'd have to make sure we were ready and waiting. The one thing Wendy really wanted to go home with this time was a passable Crestie shot after failing to get anything she was happy with last year.

After packing our stuff into the car we finally tore ourselves away at 8.34am but at least we knew that if the weather took a turn for the worse and we were snowed in we'd still be able to keep ourselves entertained with the cottage wildlife. Not content with our early morning Crestie fix we decided to head to Anagach Woods 1<sup>st</sup> to see if there were any about, as that's where we'd got lucky last year and there was always the chance of Caper to top it all off.

We arrived at 8.34am, which was way too late in the day for an active Caper but it's as good a place to start the day as any. It was snowing again and really cold and as we headed off down the track we noticed that it was deadly quiet, which wasn't a good sign but we carried on regardless.





Anagach Woods

Considering this had been our best place for Cresties last year we did the whole walk without seeing any birds at all and apart from another Roe Deer that was it. We weren't expecting to find the Cresties back at their breeding sites with the temperatures still so low but this just proved that they were still in gardens and hadn't even started to think about making a move yet. We were back at the car at 10am, feeling knackered already but as it was still early we had to keep our fingers crossed that we'd find our 2nd wind from somewhere and quickly!

Our next plan was to visit Lochindorb hopefully seeing Red Grouse and ideally getting some pics on the way. Although we'd both been more than happy with our shots from last year there's always room for improvement. As we approached the area the Red Grouse started to appear and the air was filled with their calls, as well as a lot of snow! Some of them were miles away but we had our eyes peeled for any close to the roadside. It wasn't long before I spotted a suitable subject and we hauled our cameras off the back seat. We fired off loads of shots but looking through them we could tell that most of them were out of focus. I was starting to worry that the strange effect from the morning might hinder us all week, as my settings were looking good and the images should've been spot on especially when the birds were so ridiculously close. The snow wasn't about to ease off either so after trying to get something for ages we finally gave up, as we didn't have the time to waste. We did eventually find some good ones out of hundreds but not to better last years.....maybe we were just being greedy! Wendy ended up with this one, which came as a pleasant surprise.



Red Grouse

We arrived at Lochindorb proper at 10.57am feeling much more awake than earlier, which was possibly due to the adrenaline rush of taking pics of the really close Grouse. Two years ago we'd seen (just about) Black-throated Divers at the Loch, back on their breeding grounds, but this time it was totally frozen!



Lochindorb

There was no point hanging around so I carried on down the road and past some more Red Grouse. As I turned a corner I spotted one on sitting high up on fencepost so I pulled up in the layby just next to it and wound the window down. The bird didn't move so we tried for some shots, although we should've known it was a no brainer from the start. The snow was falling heavily and the sky had grown dark so our hopes of getting what should've been our best ever shots went out the window :(.



Again, Wendy managed some good ones though including this one of it calling.



Red Grouse

In the end the bird flew and shortly after that.....the sun came out :O. Typical! By 11.32am depression had set in so we'd had enough and I drove away hoping to save the day at Findhorn Valley with, hopefully, Golden Eagle.

With eyes out on stalks we slowly drove through the Valley seeing 2x Dipper on the river and I parked up at the ½ way layby for a scan. There was a massive herd of **Red Deer**, some **Wild Goats** and loads more Red Grouse up on the snowy hilltops.



Red Deer

Apart from that there was nothing, so I drove over to the end car park and we scanned the sky for Eagles and rocky crags hoping for Wheatear or better still, a Ring Ouzel.....Bahahahaha! :/.





Findhorn Valley

We kept looking for absolutely ages and although we hate giving up, we had to knock it on the head and left having only seen 4x Buzzards. As I drove back up the road I had to stop while Wendy tried to get a picture of a baby Goat, which was running with it's mother along the side of the road.



Goats

By 1.43pm we'd left the Valley and were heading up the Farr Road, which somehow we'd missed out last year. We passed a Plantation where we spotted 2x large Hawk type birds displaying over it and for a second we thought that they could be Goshawks so I stopped the car. One of the birds was much smaller than the other and the bigger one didn't seem to have the bulk of a Goshawk so unfortunately we had to assume Sparrowhawk. We were actually aiming for the end of the Farr Road, where there's apparently a lone male Black Grouse, but I'd been so impressed with the scenery last time that anything else would be a bonus.

Thankfully Farr Road didn't disappoint, I'd been worried that it would just look flat white with snow but I'd been soooooo wrong. The snow made it look totally different if not better than last time, as it wasn't completely covered. Wendy

spotted a small flock of Finches so I pulled over while she jumped out and looked back down the road at the birds. We were both shocked when she called out, "**Bullfinch!**" as it was the last place on earth we'd expected to see them! I grabbed my bins for a look and sure enough there were Bullfinches sitting on the Armco barrier at the side of the road :O. They didn't hang around though and were off down into the steep slopes of the valley but even so, they'd been a good find. With that bit of excitement over I drove off and turned a corner only to find a Red Kite. Red Kite? There? What the.....? Wendy grabbed her camera and jumped out of the car in the vain hope it would come our way so she could better the shots she'd got in Dumfries and Galloway. It was pretty close so with her heart in her mouth she raised her camera, got the bird in the frame and had it in focus but as she tried to get 'Photo of the Week' she found that her fingers didn't work! Her fingers were already numb but the glove liners inside her gloves combo meant that she couldn't feel a thing and she missed the shutter! The bird then turned and flew off in the opposite direction and rapidly became a speck against the massive hills surrounding us :( She was absolutely gutted at having missed that shot but there wasn't much she could do by then. We actually caught up with it again on our return journey, much further away, and couldn't help but think that it was a very strange bird for the area. We crossed our fingers that no trigger happy gamekeeper would be stupid enough to think that a Red Kite was a problem. We decided that we'd go home via Carr Road for a 2<sup>nd</sup> shot at the Taiga Bean Goose as it was getting late and we hadn't given up on finding it.....yet! On the way out of Farr Road two Mistle Thrushes were near the car but even they seemed too difficult for us to get a decent shot of.



Mistle Thrush

By the time we'd hit Carr road again it was 3.20pm and after driving about ½ way, having only seen a million more Greylags, we stopped in our tracks. There was a field full of 135+ very distant Pinkfeet, so it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack if our Goose was there at all. Our biggest stumbling block was that they were too far away to make out any features but occasionally I thought I could vaguely make out orange legs on 1 of them. We couldn't tell for



sure and there was no way we'd be able to see its bill colour at such far range, so we resigned ourselves to the fact that we couldn't say it was 'the' Goose or a lifer :(. Ahead of us at the side of the road was a guy with a scope who was looking at the geese and talking to someone on his mobile. This would suggest that he'd been able to pick out the bird from the huge flock and was passing on the news. As we drove towards him he was looking at us so I pulled up next to him. "Have you seen it?" he asked, to which I replied, "Nope, they're just too far away to say." He told us that it was there, at the right hand side of the group but we still couldn't see enough detail to be happy. We explained our predicament and finally he offered up his scope so we could have a look....Phew! Looking through the scope we could easily pick out the clinching features of orange legs and bill and finally we could both say, "**Taiga Bean Goose.**" It'd been ages since I'd had a lifer on a holiday so happy with our view I was pleased to have my 1<sup>st</sup> of this trip and Wendy her 2<sup>nd</sup>. We thanked him for letting us see it and ended up having a chat to him for a while until we called it a day. Another car then came, and I had to move further up the road so I attempted a record shot from there. I think the bird is the one in the middle with its head up but it's hard to tell due to the ridiculous distance it was taken at.



Bean Goose?

We left at 3.56pm and adamant that the fire was going to be lit, we stopped off at our local shop and Wendy ran in for some firelighters. Mission accomplished we headed back to HQ via Tesco where Wendy quickly nipped in to pick up some Monkey nuts for the Squirrels.

We were back at 4.15pm, which was quite early but both of us were tired, cold and hungry and needed some time out. Fortunately we had some food so we both knocked up our much-needed tea in no time. Wendy went outside to see what was about just in time to see a Buzzard flying over the house and could hear Cresties calling from the trees round the front. She was also totally baffled, as she could've sworn she'd heard a Cuckoo but it was far too early for any to be back yet. The only thing we could think was that another bird was mimicking the call, possibly a Starling? After we'd had baths I finally got the fire going while Wendy set about making a lentil and vegetable soup, which with the addition of some nice fresh bread would keep her stocked up for quick and filling dinners



until we left. The fire was a huge bonus and made the living room feel much more cosy and warm. It was certainly well worth the wait and effort.....sorted. With the snow falling outside and the fire now roaring we couldn't have asked to be in a better place :).

As I sat doing my nightly chore of going through all our photos I received a Bird Alert of a Black-throated Thrush in Aberdeenshire! Now that WAS a bird we'd both like to see and the chances of having an opportunity like that again were zero. Apparently it was in someone's garden but they were very kindly allowing interested Birders in to have a look. It said that they'd set allocated viewing times between the hours of 9-11am and 2.30-4.30pm, which was brilliant, as they didn't have to open up their house to strangers at all. This sort of thing would NEVER happen at home even though you could probably count the number of people who'd want to go round on 2 hands! Surely this poor person was going to be inundated by hoards of Birders, Photographers, Year Listers and Twitchers from all over the UK? We'd been on big Twitches before but never into someone's home, so the prospect was quite daunting. After weighing up the pros and cons we decided that if it was reported again in the morning we should definitely go for the later session. It would be just over an hours drive to get there so we didn't want to waste time travelling for something, which didn't show up again. We'd also have to leave HQ at 7am, at the latest, and neither of us had the inclination to get up at some ungodly hour for a total gamble. We'd just have to sit tight in the morning and wait to see if turned up again to then go for the afternoon slot.

At 10pm we were sinking fast and as the fire slowly died down we turned in for an early night.

Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> March

Needing a lie in I'd set my alarm for 6.15am as we'd concluded that the Cresties started to come in at around 6.30am. Wendy got up and opened the curtains to find that it was another lovely sunny day. As she opened the blinds in the kitchen she was horrified to see 2x Cresties already on the side feeder! Uh Oh.....did this mean that we'd missed our tiny little window for Crestie shots AGAIN?

It was absolutely freezing sitting by the open patio doors in the living room but we were determined to get some pics that morning. A Jay was noisily flying around in the forest and eventually a Red Squirrel decided to come into the garden to take some nuts. Being massive fans of Red Squirrels and having waited days for this to happen we filled our boots with pics as it came and went, even burying some of the Monkey nuts we'd put out.....soooooooo cute! I was relieved to have brought my 70-200mm lens with me on this holiday and it coped really well at f4, as the Squirrel was at such close range I had no chance with the big 500mm.



Red Squirrel

It was still wearing its rather white looking winter coat and behaving very much like we'd expect it to in the grimmest months of the year. Last year they were obviously much more advanced being all bright red and shiny but then again it had been the warmest March on record!

Wendy was toing and froing getting our lunch, breakfast and herself ready whilst checking all the other feeders for the Cresties. On this particular morning their visits were few and far between and with them turning up earlier than usual any sort of pattern we'd though we'd worked out was duly binned :( They didn't appear to be creatures of habit at all and came and went sporadically. One of their most infuriating habits she'd noticed was to spend ages high up in the trees at the front of the house to eat the nuts they were taking from the garden.....so that's where they disappeared off to! Even if they'd been low down we had no chance of getting any shots, as the sun was right in your face out the front in the morning. Typically though, that seemed to be their favourite area....Urrghhhhh! It was looking as though her chances of getting a decent Crestie shot were becoming ever more unlikely. We'd both ended up with just a few very dark pics of them at the feeders, which wasn't what either of us wanted at all. Wendy had even gone round the side of house to try there but the condensation pouring out of the central heating outlet was causing a smoke effect right in front of her frame! It was soooooo cold outside that after standing motionless, with her camera raised for ages, with only 1 visit from the Cresties her fingers and toes had gone totally numb and her teeth were chattering so she eventually gave up. While she was out there she'd heard that Cuckoo call again and we were still baffled and no closer to working out what it was. All I can say is that it certainly wasn't an actual Cuckoo.

At 9am we'd had enough disappointment for one day and left for our 1<sup>st</sup> plan of the day. The temperature in my car was reading 0C again and our toes were still

numb from our early morning photo session. I needed to get petrol to cover me in case we had to drive to Aberdeenshire so I drove the 4 miles to refuel. At 9.30am the Bird Alert we'd been waiting for came in, which determined our plan for the day. We were going to someone's house to see if we could get us another lifer :).

Our 1<sup>st</sup> plan of the day was to drive through Tomintoul hoping for some better views of Black Grouse. Having only seen them in the distance on our previous trips and a brief fly by on the way up this time there was definitely room for improvement. We reached the road by 9.53am and about 100 yards down it I nearly crashed the car when I spotted a black blob so close to the road it was untrue. I had to slam the brakes on and reverse, if it was a Black Grouse it would be amazing. Sure enough there was a cracking Male Black Grouse no more than 20yds off the road. We got our cameras ready as I reversed but just as I got the window down the bird flew along with a female, even closer, which we hadn't spotted!!! I was gutted, having dreamt of getting a decent Black Grouse picture for years and I just knew we wouldn't get another chance like that again.

As we headed east the snow became heavier and thicker on the ground, which made for some spectacular scenery.



Road from Tomintoul





More scenery

Wendy was enjoying the views and ended up taking some video of the drive and by 10.25am we were at a height of 2019ft with 20ft drifts at either side of the road. After turning a corner we found we'd reached some kind of civilization with Log Cabin style buildings complete with icicles hanging from the roofs.



Lecht Centre

Looking more like somewhere in Switzerland than the UK we wondered what it was until we spotted some ski lifts silhouetted on the horizon. We'd come across Lecht Ski Centre and the car park was pretty full. There were skiers wandering around as well as out on the slopes having fun on their skis and snowboards.....Cool!



Lecht Ski Resort

Although the weather last year had unbelievably warm and sunny (and pretty good on our 1<sup>st</sup> visit 2yrs ago) it was equally as nice to see the place in winter and a total contrast. Further down the road Wendy made me pull over for a pic and went running off back down the road in 'Inbetweeners' mode when we saw a sign, which highly amused us :D. As she stood pointing at the sign like some sort of game show hostess and grinning inanely, a car came round the corner heading straight for her. The young couple inside had spotted her and were laughing, so after a feeble attempt to hide behind it but realizing that her legs were still poking out from the bottom for all to see she re-emerged for a picture.



The photo says it all!

Further down the road were loads of Red Grouse picking their way through the snow for shoots to eat and occasionally stumbling when the snow gave way under their weight. By the time we were approaching the Braemar road it was -1C and we both needed a WC break. The next town we came across was called Ballater and having driven round it a couple of times and getting lost I finally found the public toilets. The town itself was much bigger than we'd expected and appeared to have a good number of tourists milling around. This confused me a little as I couldn't work out what the attraction was as it just looked like a



normal old town in the middle of the country. Maybe there was a massive Whisky Distillery around the corner or something? I crunched off through the snow first to the Men's while Wendy stayed at the car until I came back. She was next but reappeared moments later shouting over to me, "Have you got 20p?" It turned out that it was 20p to get into the Ladies but the Gents (being the cleverer sex :P) had its door wedged open so was free! At 11.32am we carried on and on the way out of Ballater we noticed loads of dead Oystercatchers at the side of the roads. This confused me even more as we were miles and miles away from the coast and weren't expecting Oycs anywhere near there. It was still too early to think about going straight to the BT Thrush house so I'd incorporated a visit to a Nature Reserve where annually there's a wintering Great Grey Shrike. The bird hadn't been reported for a while but that could've been either because it was such a regular occurrence that people had stopped putting the news out or that it'd gone. Either way it had to be worth a shot, as it was nicely situated on the way and you can't sniff at a Shrike.

It was 11.43am when we parked up in the Muir of Dinnet NNR car park and by the Visitor's Centre where some staff, busily renovating one of the signs before it officially opened in April. Nothing unusual about that but.....they were only wearing T-shirts! Ok, it was sunny but we were still in all our layers and arctic expedition gear, which felt more appropriate as it was still freezing. Wendy was dying for a coffee so we saw it as a good time to eat our lunch before setting off for the walk. After lunch I thought I'd try and get closer to where we wanted to be so drove off down the road hoping to find a layby somewhere. Unfortunately there wasn't anywhere else so my seemingly good idea had only resulted in ending up further away and wasting time. At 12.12pm we returned to the car park with the distinct feeling of *deja vu*!

With the faffing over we set off on our walk just as it started snowing heavily again. It was difficult to see where the footpath went due to the thick covering of white stuff but we managed to find our way to the Great Grey Shrike spot.



Shrike spot

Visibility was terrible as it was snowing so heavily and from what we could actually see there was no sign of the bird or any others for that matter, so we turned round to go back.





Muir of Dinnet

We ended up getting slightly lost on a path through some trees (well we think it was a path anyway) but finally ended up out in the open and back on the path to the road. Wendy then went all hyper, after finding a small snowman at the side of the track, which she felt could do with a change of image so she gave him some eyes, a Mohican using some dried up bracken and a seed pod nose.



Punk Snowman

She then went on to pull out his oversized branch arms and fill in the holes, which kept her happy for a while after slipping into Karl Pilkington mode on our freezing cold and ½ blind walk. After she'd finished we scurried back to the car with only 1 plan left, a house twitch.....Urrghhhh :/.

At 2.20pm we turned into a housing estate in Banchory and found the address easily. There was another guy heading that way who was smiling at us so we presumed he was there for the same reason. We parked up outside the house with 10mins to wait before the doors were opened. I reckoned we'd give it no more than 30mins and if the bird didn't show then we'd give up. There was a line of trees at the back of the houses in the row, which were full of Blackbirds so

we had a scan through them. It would've been great to have found the Thrush amongst them, so that we wouldn't have to go into somebody's house after all, but obviously we're not that lucky. Moments later another car pulled up in front of us, which was definitely another Birder. When he got out of his car a few minutes later and walked towards the house we turned round to see that the 1<sup>st</sup> guy we'd seen had just opened the door and was standing in the porch. This was our cue to get out and follow suit so Wendy was 1<sup>st</sup> to make the move. Luckily he was very friendly and as we took our boots off before going in he introduced us to the actual owner of the property. She was a lovely lady from Yorkshire who was typically warm and welcoming but also very relieved to see another female. Apparently having streams of men pouring into her house for the past 2 days had done nothing for her reputation and a neighbour had even phoned her up to ask what was going on :D. The guy who'd let us in was just a bloke from the local Birding Club who'd taken over from her son, who'd had to go to work. Obviously it's not preferable for lady living on her own to have a load of strangers in her house and he was obviously helping to look out for her. How nice was that? :).

They showed the 3 of us through into the dining room just off the kitchen, where there was a great view of her back garden through the patio doors. She had feeders out and all the usual garden birds were making the most of the easy pickings. There were also Siskins and a lovely male Brambling, which had been a regular visitor recently, popped in to join the party. We were offered seats and being the smallest Wendy took a footstool, so there was a view over her head, and myself and the other guy (who also seemed really nice) took chairs behind her. The 3 of us sat there watching the garden and it wasn't long before the doorbell rang and another person joined the expanding gathering. Wendy asked how many people had turned up so far and was told that the previous day she'd had 20 and that morning there'd been 14, who'd all successfully seen the bird. There was a birdbath just outside the window and we'd both seen the pretty gripping pics on BirdGuides of the Thrush sitting on that very bath really close! What we would've done to have seen that.....jammy or what? She then went on to say that some bloke had turned up that morning, after the allotted time, and wasn't very happy at being turned away. Instead of going away and coming back later he'd actually taken it upon himself to walk down through the brambles, along the line of trees behind the fence at the back of her house, which had resulted in flushing the bird. The bird hadn't been seen since.....Uh Oh!

This made alarm bells ring in our heads and if everyone else who'd been had seen it no problem then it was looking to us as if it had totally cleared off. While we waited the doorbell continued to ring and we ended up with 6 other people sitting/standing to wait for the bird to show. We overheard one guy, after being told it hadn't been seen, saying he wouldn't come in as he had to travel all the way back to Nethy Bridge.....yeah mate tell us about it! It must've been a combination of our busy week and sitting in a nice warm and comfortable house but we both found ourselves, nearly nodding off! Wendy started to get twitchy and kept turning round and giving me 'a look' to say we should give up. I kept thinking we should give it a bit longer but by 3.40pm even I'd had enough so we called it a day and got up to leave. The guy from the Bird Club put the news out that the bird hadn't been back since the incident that morning, which was the final nail in the coffin. After thanking the very kind lady for letting us in and she'd been very apologetic for the fact that we'd not seen it (although it wasn't her fault at all) we finally left :(.

Back at the car we were disappointed but not entirely surprised, as it was just about right for us, that we'd just had our 1<sup>st</sup> dip of the trip. We'd travelled all that way and had the same journey back ahead of us but hey ho, if nothing else it had definitely been an experience! Another plan of mine had been to go to Rattray Head for the long staying Desert Wheatear while we were in the area but as it was another ½hr away, making the journey home 2hrs we decided not to bother.

Going home was the only plan left and the quickest route was back over the snowy mountains we'd gone on.



Lecht Road

Having thought it'd would be boring we were pleasantly surprised when we spotted a **Mountain Hare**, which was still mainly white and further along was a **Brown Hare**. The Red Grouse, which had all been feeding so high up earlier on in the day, had all moved much further down the mountains and there were 100's of them. The temperature in my car was now reading -3C and even the trees up there had icicles on their branches so I can't say I blamed them! As we'd be passing again we thought we'd give Tomintoul another shot but we didn't hold any hopes. Wendy dropped another belter on the way exclaiming, "BLACK....." paused for a few moments and ended with a much more subdued, ".....Pheasant!" Doh :D.

I could've been forgiven for totally ignoring her by this point, as I thought delirium had well and truly set in, but when she shrieked, "OMG in the tree!" for some reason I looked up. It's a good job I did, as there was a male Black Grouse sitting in the branches of another roadside tree. I slammed on the brakes and Wendy put the window down and quickly grabbed her camera from the back seat for a record shot. The conditions were the worst they could've possibly been with the setting sun right behind the bird.....Urrghhhhh! She fired off a few shots so I joined in too. While I was aiming at the bird Wendy spotted another male flapping up onto a branch a bit higher up and then a female. We were totally blown away to see 3x Black Grouse so close but nothing that good lasts for long and they eventually flew.....joined by 3 others :O. Unbelievable! It's such a shame the sun had been against us, as the shots we could've taken might've been great. In reality this is the best of the thoroughly BAD bunch taken by me but at least you can see it's a Black Grouse I suppose :(.





Black Grouse

With them all having well and truly cleared off we carried on down the road finding yet another male, again sitting in a tree at the side of the road. Woo Hoo.....we'd just had our best ever views of Black Grouse in circumstances we'd never have predicted and at such close range :). Or should that be :- Boo Hoo.... we'd just had our best ever views of Black Grouse in circumstances we'd never have predicted and at such close range.....but failed to get a decent shot! :( Either way, it was a fantastic way to end a very mixed day.

We were very relieved to finally be back at HQ at 5.48pm and after unloading the car it was undoubtedly teatime. With Wendy's homemade soup in the fridge and my super quick pasta we were fed and watered in record time :). While Wendy was enjoying her bath I looked on BirdGuides and not only did the Thrush not reappear but the Desert Wheatear hadn't been seen all day for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in months! I know we joke about it often but we really had seemed to have jinxed Aberdeenshire that day, even us just thinking about going for the Desert Wheatear was enough to make it leave :( I picked up the cottage's info folder to look for something and stumbled across an email from a guest who'd not only seen, but also photographed, a Pine Marten in the garden. She'd sat, freezing by an opened window until eventually at 11.30pm one came to the baited feeder and she got a shot of it....Woah! We had no evidence that there was any about at all but couldn't help but wonder that maybe we should be trying harder. That said though, we were so tired we collapsed into bed at 10.30pm and were asleep as soon as our heads hit the pillows!

Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> March

Call us gluttons for punishment but we'd set the alarm again for 6.15am. Wendy was up 5mins early and as usual, wandered around the house opening the curtains.....even before making herself a cappuccino! When she drew back the

dining room curtains and looked at the bird feeder she saw a very cheeky Crestie sitting there already. So much for getting up in time, they'd probably already stuffed their faces and wouldn't come back again.....Grrrrr! Typically, this was the feeder at the side of house again, where you can't get any pics and they take the nuts off to eat in the trees.



Side of the cottage

Annoyingly the pair of them continued to come down time and time again and there didn't seem any logical reason why they preferred that feeder. Why didn't they like the ones at the back where the light was perfect and there were nice sticks for them to pose on? :(.

It was a frosty morning and colder than it had been but it was also another lovely sunny day, which was good enough for us. The Woodpecker was drumming loudly from the forest and occasionally he could be seen flying between trees before vanishing again. I went for a look at next door's feeders to see how they were doing and if they had our Squirrel or Cresties :P. Luckily, although not for them, there was no sign. I did spot a lovely **Yellowhammer** in their bushes though, which was a good addition to our trip list. I ditched off taking any pics from HQ and instead went to explore the woods, at the side of the cottage. I didn't go far as I was after a nice looking fallen branch covered in lichen, which would be perfect for a Crestie shot. Unfortunately, after I'd tied my chosen prop to fence in a position I was happy with, the Cresties weren't playing so I'd have to wait till the next day to test it out. Our neighbours were also up at the crack of dawn again and already in their hides in the back garden. Wendy had finally made eye contact and said, "Hello!" to one of them for the 1<sup>st</sup> time as she'd been coming back into the house. They must've also been fans of keeping yourself to yourself :P.

As we set off at 8.28am the sun was shining so I'd cleverly decided to myself that I didn't need my gilet under my coat as I'd be too warm. Wendy was planning on staying in the full works till the bitter end, as being cold is probably her most hated thing. After pulling out of the driveway and seeing my car reading -2.5C I began to wonder if I'd made a mistake so ran it by Wendy. After calling me a, "Total plonker!" or words to that effect, I turned round and went back to HQ for

the gilet that should've been put on before going out :/. We were, after all, just about to go on a walk in -2.5C to try again for Caper!

We arrived at nearby Forest Lodge car park at 8.41am and as we started walking down the path it felt bitterly cold. When I pointed out some frost covered sticks on the ground Wendy couldn't resist picking one up and waving it around like a sparkler on bonfire night....such a child! She insisted I got a picture of it, which took ages to get right, before the novelty wore off.



Sparkler.....with a bit of imagination!

Our hearts sank when we saw a woman coming towards us who was out running with her dog off it's lead.....Noooooooooooo! That would probably mean all the birds anywhere near the path would've been flushed even before we arrived :(.

Not wanting to give up we carried on feeling unusually optimistic, until 2 blokes came running towards us also with a dog off it's lead....double Noooooooooooo! All we could think was that we might as well give up there and then, but seeing as we were already there we decided to give it a go anyway.

We found a good number of inactive looking **Wood Ant** nests but the ants were probably somewhere deep inside trying to keep warm from the snow. With every corner we turned our hearts were in our mouths just in case we struck lucky and caught even a glimpse of our bird. We should've known from the start that our chances were practically nil after the runners and when we reached the final stretch back to the road we knew the heat was on.





Forest Lodge

This was where we'd seen our Caper last year and although it'd been all too brief it was an unbelievably special moment that neither of will ever forget. With our eyes out on stalks we slowly walked and listened but saw nothing apart some bird footprints in the snow so we stopped to wonder what they belonged to.



Woodcock tracks?

Straight away Wendy reckoned Woodcock, which I think was probably spot on but further along I found a much bigger set of prints.



Monster tracks

These were absolutely huge and both of us were as near as certain that they belonged to a Caper, as surely nothing else would be big enough? We also found some poo amongst them, which must have belonged to the same bird. We were back at the car feeling a touch deflated by 10.36am, where we heard a Crestie calling. We'd already seen Capercaillie this time around and were pleased enough with that so to see another one would've been asking way too much. Our dream of randomly finding a photographable one on the ground were still unfilled but we'll keep hoping that one day it'll become a reality.....dream on! :P. With neither of us having taken a decent enough Crestie shot yet and knowing that our time was rapidly running out I thought we should chance our luck at a nearby feeding station. Surely they'd be hanging around there somewhere?

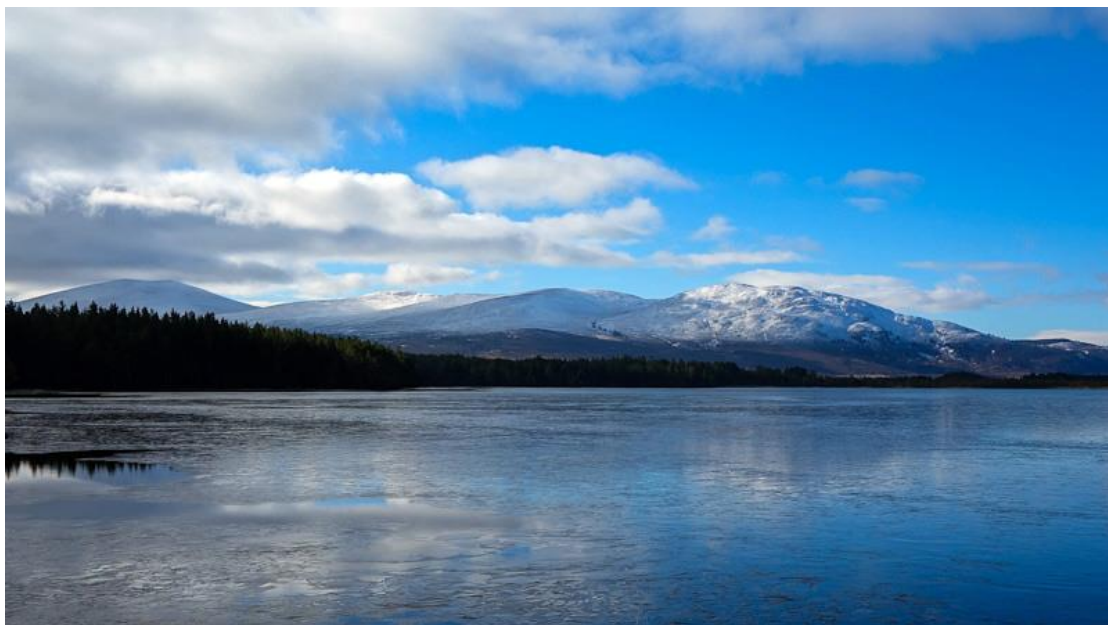
We arrived at Loch Garten at 10.52am and I pulled the car up so that we could see the comings and goings at the feeders. We knew we couldn't go into the Visitors Centre as it was still closed and wouldn't be open until 1<sup>st</sup> April but there were a few people knocking round regardless. The feeders were a hive of activity and a lot of the Chaffinches were on the ground under them, hoovering up the crumbs. There was a Goldcrest amongst them too, which we hadn't expected, so not wanting to waste another golden opportunity Wendy grabbed her camera to try for a shot. Considering they're not easy subjects and it was her 1<sup>st</sup> ever Goldcrest shot it didn't turn out too bad, although she was far from happy with it.





Goldcrest

Just then panic set in as I'd spotted 2x Cresties on the tree next to the feeder and quickly told Wendy, who instantly stopped what she was doing. Within seconds they'd dropped down onto a lovely lichen covered branch right next to the car and adrenaline started to pump through us, as this would be THE shot we'd both been waiting for. Before we could get our cameras onto them they flew up and onto the feeders high in the neighbouring tree.....Aarrghhhhhh! Disaster! :( We sat waiting for them to possibly repeat their moves while watching a Red Squirrel on the nuts in the hope that it'd shift and move onto a branch but it wasn't playing ball either. There was no further sign of the Cresties and I thought that if we were planning on going back it would have to be earlier as even our garden Cresties disappeared after about 8.30am. As we pulled away we looked out over the Loch to see that it too was completely frozen.



Loch Garten



What chance did we stand of finding an Osprey before we left with everywhere looking as though it was still the middle of winter? We were surprised when we saw the time, as we left, it was 11.47am so we'd been sitting in the car park for practically 1hr wasting our valuable time. It'd been fun and quite exciting in parts though but totally depressing to think that we'd been so close to getting the kind of shot we'd always envisaged. Still with Cresties on the brain I wanted to go and see if they were back at our other site from last year.

After a bit of confusion over which layby to pull into (well it had been a year) I finally parked up at 12.04pm knowing that this was going to be a very quick visit. We walked along the path and I heard a bird that we'd have put money on having seen already. We'd been to loads of places where we'd expected to find them but hadn't heard or seen one. I alerted Wendy, who heard it too, and we watched a **Crossbill** fly over.....Phew! There was absolutely no sign of the Cresties being back, which came as no surprise but it was worth a check. The forest was pretty dead and uninspiring but we were hoping to pull an uneventful start back up again with a real Scottish Specialty.

We left at 12.15pm not knowing quite what to expect from our next stop. It was definitely going to be extremely cold and snowy but we weren't sure how bad the conditions were up there. One thing that would work in our favour was that, as the Ski season was still in full swing, we could get the train up and get out at the top without having to walk up.....Wahey!! :). It would most likely be busy though with skiers so we'd probably have to wait in a massive queue for the railway up. As we approached there were a lot of coaches and cars so it looked like the road was open. Neither of us had ever seen the Cairngorm car park so busy before and as I drove around looking for a space we could just imagine not finding one and having to ditch the plan off. It was absolutely chokka with cars and vans and there were Skiers and Snowboarders milling about everywhere.



Cairngorm car park

The ski lifts were all busy as were the slopes and the whole place was buzzing with happy looking people who all seemed to be having great fun. The scenery up there was amazing too but we were surprised that it was far less snowy than the drive past the Lecht Ski Resort and through the mountains. Eventually Wendy spotted a car pulling out to leave so I grabbed it quick. Phew, we were in,

so before anything else we had our lunch in the car and did a bit of people watching. There was every kind of person imaginable there from very young to very old, the trendsetters to the purely practical. A couple of young lads, who thought they were in the trendsetter category, came towards us. One of them, who obviously rated himself, had massive baggy ski pants on, which were pulled down to near enough his knees! He struggled to walk in his ridiculous pants but finally pulled them up a little bit when he got back to his car to grab a snack. We think he'd have been better off waiting until after he'd taken a very public WC break right in front of us in the car park! Having not washed his hands he then went on to rummage around in the boot and pulled out a sarnie which he proceeded to eat.....yuk! Our lunch went down a treat and with so much going on around us we could've sat there for hours but it was time to get going. In theory we could actually have got one of our target birds from the car but as luck would have it there was no sign of them! There was another rather depressed looking Birder sitting with a scope by the picnic tables, who must've been looking for them too. As we got out of the car we thought we could hear them but after a good scan around we finally realized that it was just the wind whipping through the cables of the ski lift....Doh!

Our next stop was the Rangers Office to see where our birds had last been seen and as I'd done the honours last year it was now Wendy's turn :). The Birder from the picnic tables was in there too so she joined in their conversation and found out where we needed to look. The pair of them came out chatting and the other guy reckoned that if we wanted to see our car park birds we'd need to come back later when the car park was quieter to stand any chance. He wished her luck for up at the top and said he'd probably see her up there, in a bit. There was no queue at the ticket desk and we got the next train up to the top so having been convinced it would be really busy we were pleasantly surprised. Being the only Birders around, my camera set up became the embarrassing subject of much interest and people were whispering, pointing and staring from all angles. Not liking busy places or attention at the best of times, while Wendy turned around and smiled pleasantly when a kid mentioned the lens, I quietly told him to, "Sod off!" One slight problem was that Wendy informed me later that I hadn't been quiet at all! Hahahahaha.....Whoops! As we waited to get off, one skier who was looking more at my lens than where he was going, tripped up which gave us a snigger :P. Stepping off at the top we could already tell it was well below 0C so we took our time and followed the skiers outside.

When we walked out through the doors we were greeted by about 50 pairs skis sticking out of the snow while their owners were inside. The snow had become so compacted from all the activity that the first thing I did was slip.....Ooops! It was lethal out there, there were people whizzing around on skis and boards everywhere and we quickly realized that we'd have to be on our guard so we didn't get run over.



Cairngorm Mountain

We wandered over to the map to work out where we needed to be to find the birds and were instantly hit by the icy wind. Even though we were wearing several layers, which had worked perfectly all week, the wind cut straight through them like a knife through butter! The temperature on top of Cairngorm was colder than either of us had bargained on so we knew we'd made the right decision in not walking up. It was supposedly -10C and that was before taking wind chill into account!! :O. All we had to do was find our bird and leave as quickly as possible before hypothermia set in, so we crossed our fingers that it wouldn't take too long. The instructions given by the Ranger didn't make much sense (more like Wendy, maps and directions don't mix! :P) so after a bit of head scratching I eventually worked out that the area the Ranger meant was below the restaurant between 2 ski runs.

We thought we'd get a better angle from the viewing platform, which annoyingly meant walking through the busy café. The café and bar were absolutely heaving and there wasn't even one free seat, so even though she protested Wendy wasn't getting a coffee or a Shandy for that matter! Everyone in there was either a skier or snowboarder and they all looked very red faced, wind swept and in need of some hot food.

Emerging onto the platform we both started to look and luckily I found one quickly and called out, "**Ptarmigan**" to Wendy. She got onto it and I took a very bad record shot, unfortunately it wasn't close enough for anything decent.





Ptarmigan

Although the bird was right slap bang in the middle of skiing chaos it was totally unfazed by the activity around it. We spotted the Birder who Wendy had spoken to, so when he came over to ask if we'd had any joy we were able to show him. With all 3 of us happy to have seen what we set out to we decided that the cold was too much so we left the other guy to it and headed back down. We'd just missed our ride so had a quick nosey in the gift shop before the next was due in 10mins. The ride down was amazing, the scenery was just to die for and watching the skiers flying down the slopes along side us was pretty impressive. As we hurtled downwards I took some video with my new camera but the battery ran out ½ way down.....Typical! This is a still from the video but it doesn't do it justice.



Wendy was even fancying a go at skiing herself by the end, even though she's always said she'd never do it as she'd probably break her neck! Back at the bottom Wendy wanted to go into the other shop so I reluctantly followed her. She picked up some lovely warm looking ski socks which were dead cheap as they were a children's size and a Buff, which wasn't so cheap. I got myself a wall map of the Cairngorms, which has now been framed by my Dad and has taken pride of place on the computer room wall. The woman behind the till encouragingly told us that our birds would be around somewhere even with the car park being busy. With 1 bird down we still had 1 to go, even if meant going back there later after the hoards had gone. We'd already sorted out a plan to go back after tea as we weren't giving up until we'd given it our best shot.

Over by the car park another Birder/Photographer had taken up residence over by the picnic tables so Wendy thought it would be a good idea to wander over to see if he'd had any luck. We walked over and casually asked if he'd had anything and got chatting. Apparently he'd had 3x birds about 1hr ago but nothing since but he was sitting in position by a bench, which he knew had crumbs around it patiently waiting for them to return. Talk about the patience of a saint! It turned out that he'd started walking up the mountain with his mates for Ptarmigan but could feel his dodgy knee protesting so he'd had to drop out. He didn't want to be THE one who had to get the mountain rescue crew out and we can't say we blamed him, as that's exactly the reason I'd decided to take the train rather than walk! What made it worse for him was that the others in his group were much older than him and would be up there getting some fantastic shots.....Poor guy! We ended up getting onto the topic of what we had in our gardens and this guys list and description was sounding uncannily familiar. I asked him outright if he was staying next to us and he looked at Wendy again and said, "I thought you looked like the woman I'd said hello to this morning!" Unbelievably, this was one of neighbours from next door! He was called Neil and was from Essex and, talk about small world, we found out that he was staying there with the couple who'd taken the photos of the Pine Marten in our back garden. After discussing all sorts including our websites and exchanging our cards it turned out that he also recognized me from Twitter. We got onto the topic of Capercaillie and were concerned to hear that there were plans to move the bird we'd gone for. Even though he couldn't tell us the site he was on about it sounded like it had to be that one. According to him the bird was looking 'a bit sorry for himself' and was getting too much disruption, especially from a certain Wildlife Tours Guide. People on the tour were even being brought into the forest to find him :O. Talk about overstepping the line!

After a lengthy conversation all of sudden we heard the sound we'd been waiting for and a flock of 15x birds flew in.....**Snow Buntings!** Very nice :). They hung around on one of the picnic tables nearby and we tried for some shots, but they were unusually flighty and didn't settle for long before they were off again.



Snow Bunting

It was very nice to see a much darker bird than we'd usually see during winter in the Isle of Man. Having got both our target birds we were happy with that but the birds kept coming backwards and forwards, it was just a case of waiting. Eventually while we were being kept busy with the Snow Buntings our neighbour spotted his mates coming slowly back down the mountain with all their gear draped over their shoulders. They were slipping and sliding all over the place so it can't have been an easy walk at all. Ages later and with introductions aside, one guy showed us some of his Ptarmigan pics and after all the effort they'd put in they'd certainly been rewarded with some totally gripping shots of them in the snow. Well earned we think and hats off to them, they'd just put us to shame! Although this did make us regret taking the easy option and only seeing 1x distant bird we still didn't fancy the walk they'd just endured and with our fingers painfully cold by then we made our excuses and left them to it. Back at the car at 3.45pm and just as I was about to drive off the Snow Buntings returned and landed just a few feet away from them, closer than they'd been the whole time we'd been there! This was yet again typical of our luck and as we watched them all filling their boots and probably getting amazing shots of them too we both let out a painful sigh.....Urrghhhh!

On our way home we thought we'd give our new Caper site a final go before we left.





Nice road on the way

When we arrived we saw that since we'd been there last someone had written on the signs in a thick black marker, "Certain Wildlife Tours KEEP OUT!" We felt sad for the bird and very uneasy being there again but knew that we'd be keeping to the footpaths and wouldn't be disturbing anything. We did the whole walk again and saw absolutely nothing, which was quite depressing, as that was our last attempt at the bird. Although we felt good at not having resorted to breaking the code of conduct, everyone else had seen it and got belting shots bar us....Grrrrrrrrrr! To top it all off my dodgy knee decided to go 'pop' and then cause me some pain, which was the last thing I needed. With respect to the bird we left him in peace but we couldn't help feeling sad that he hadn't come out of the forest to investigate us and give us the great view we were dreaming of. Back at the car at 5.10pm Wendy had started to feel really ropey, she was shaky and needed something to eat quickly. We still had to go into Aviemore to get some wood for the fire and more Monkey nuts for the Squirrels so we decided to find somewhere to eat first.

I'd had my eye on an Inn, which wasn't there last year and looked quite nice so I parked up outside at 5.35pm. We went over to have a look at the menu only to find that it was very limited and that there was nothing on it that either of us fancied. Over the road was the Cairngorm Hotel, which looked a bit busy for my liking but Wendy reckoned that was a good sign. We crossed over and the menu there was spot on so we went in. The bar was chokka with young and old skiers drinking and the dining room was practically full as well. Luckily there was a table in a nice dark corner for us to hide in and with everyone else in skiwear we didn't feel out of place. After ordering our drinks and food we could finally relax and let someone else do the cooking for a change. Wendy had been spoilt for choice as to what to order but had decided on the suitably Scottish sounding Vegetable Broth with a side of chips, as she was feeling so rough. I ordered Cajun chicken and chips, which wasn't local fare at all but both our meals went down a treat. Wendy was totally stuffed and after I'd helped her out with her chips I still had room for pudding. I ordered the chocolate cheesecake but while I was waiting for it alarm bells started ringing in my guts! :O. I casually announced this to Wendy who instantly spat her drink out all over the table and slumped over the table doubled up with laughter. This made me crack up too and neither of us could stop for about 5 minutes so the other people in the room must have

thought we were both mental! Fortunately I managed to hang on and my massive pudding arrived, which although it was very nice, was a bit too much so I struggled to finish it.

Not wanting to push my luck we didn't hang around and were back in the car by 6.49pm. Wendy grabbed some wood from the garage so we could have some heat later and then dashed into Tesco for more nuts for the Squirrels.....sorted :). We finally arrived at HQ at 7.15pm feeling very tired and strangely like we'd been out in the sun all day. Our faces were tingling like when you've been sunburned but we could only presume it was more windburn than anything. Obviously I had 1<sup>st</sup> use of the bathroom as soon as I got in and after my emergency was over Wendy went for her bath. While she was relaxing I tried to get the fire going but the new wood wouldn't light and crackled and hissed for ages before setting alight. I thought I'd never get there but eventually a roaring fire was up and running.....Phew! We were so tired that at 10.15pm we gave up and went to bed.

Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> March

At 5.30am we were up and about dying to see if the Cresties were using my new branch set up. When I opened the curtains to another sunny day I noticed that the branch had vanished and found it lying in bits on the ground. I could only think that it was the many Crows that visited the garden....or maybe it had been a Pine Marten? Hahaha :P. So much for that great idea! Being up so early we thought we'd stand a good chance of catching the Cresties and Squirrels before they disappeared for the day. Next door were, not surprisingly, also ready and waiting in their hides outside. It wasn't long before our initial excitement had been replaced by depression. The Cresties were coming in at the side very infrequently and the Squirrel was twitchy and not playing ball again either, despite us having put loads of food out for them.....Grrrrrrr!

The patio doors were open as usual and it wasn't long before the living room felt like a freezer and our fingers and toes were numb before we'd even gone out. With our luck being so bad we gave up and got ourselves ready to go out, with one eye on the garden of course. With 1 day to go we desperately wanted to get a good Crestie shot and with our garden, which we'd had such high hopes of, not delivering we'd have to think quickly.

At 8.17am the temperature in my car was reading a not so barmy -2C and we set off to give the Loch Garten feeders another try. This was to be our last day in Scotland and although we'd seen everything we'd set out to (apart from the Black-throated Thrush fiasco) we were failing miserably to get any decent pics to show for it. When we arrived at 8.25am it was -3C and there was literally nothing about. We sat in the car waiting to see if things would liven up but there was no sign of any action. We left at 9am having probably given it too long and wasting time. Wendy wanted to stop to get a photo of the very scenic but frozen Loch Garten as we passed.



Loch Garten

Boat of Garten was our next plan and when we arrived at 9.12am, as we'd survived all week without them we thought we deserved to indulge in a bit of luxury. I dug out the heated hand-warmers and grabbed us a pair each :P. After activating them and stuffing them into our glove liners, which were topped off with Seal Skin (nothing to do with actual Seals) gloves, our hands would surely be warm.

Luckily, as we approached the feeders, there was a Squirrel already there, eating nuts. It didn't want to budge and there were no others around so pics weren't an option. There was a Treecreeper and a Goldcrest foraging around on the forest floor so we tried to get some shots whilst keeping an eye on the Woodpecker, which was giving us the usual runaround! While we stood motionless amongst the trees I noticed some of the Heather moving. It wasn't windy so it couldn't be that and had to be a small rodent of some description. I pointed out the spot to Wendy who got totally fixed on it and watched it moving its way through the undergrowth until finally it looked as though it would hit a bald spot and reveal itself. She got her camera ready for it and just as the voley looking thing was about to poke it's head out.....I shrieked, "Crestie right next to us in tree!" Wendy completely freaked out, ditched off voley thing and turned around to see a Crestie really close and posing for a picture. The only problem was that there were branches in front of it so, although we were in a prime position we couldn't take any pictures until it was in the clear. For a split second it popped out but it happened so quickly that we stood no chance of getting a shot. To heighten the blow the bird then flew onto the feeders and continued to come back and forth for a few minutes before briefly sitting, totally in the open on a branch and inevitably clearing off. Wendy managed to grab a shot but was totally gutted that it was on a feeder.....if only she hadn't got so into the voley thing.





Crestie

Last year she'd got a shot of one on a branch but it wasn't as sharp so although this one was definitely sharper the feeder just ruined it for her.....BIG time! Before we left she did have a look to see if she could relocate the rodent but the Heather was totally still. By that point our fingers and toes hurt with the cold, even though we had hand-warmers in our gloves, and Wendy was depressed and in desperate need of a WC break so we called it a day and drove off at 10.15am.

My next plan was to go to Loch an Eilein but as we were passing I thought we could have a quick look and see what was going on at Avielochan. The answer to that though was – absolutely nothing! There were a few Goldeneye, so it was interesting watching them displaying to each other and something we don't get to see at home. We arrived at Loch an Eilein at 10.38am and paid the £3 car parking charge. The guy at the ticket booth must have a nice job as the feeders next to it had a Red Squirrel on them :). Obviously we headed straight for the WC's and Wendy skipped out a lot happier. We found another Red Squirrel in the woods and down by the Loch we could actually hear the ice creaking and cracking and see the water rippling under it.



Loch an Eilein

There wasn't much on the Loch, as we'd expected with it being frozen, but I'd spotted what I thought was a Diver bobbing about in a small area of water out by the Island. I'd just presumed Red-throat until Wendy got onto it and was a bit more optimistic with Black-throat so I looked at it a bit more and could see that it was indeed. We'd managed to add **Black-throated Diver** to our list on our last day.....Woo Hoo! There wasn't much else we could add at that late stage and there were no reports of anything to go for on our way back down to Heysham. After a surprise trip tick and a very pleasant stroll we were back at the car by 11.35am and with the lovely sunny and blue skies the temperature had reached a scorching 2.5C. Our next stop was a return visit to Findhorn Valley to chance our luck, or lack of it, again.

As I drove through the valley towards the car park we spotted our 1<sup>st</sup> **Peregrine** of the trip and I stopped so that Wendy could get another photo of the Goats at the side of the road. As she was doing this I spotted a Mountain Hare on the rocky face of the cliff so we got some shots.



Mountain Hare

I parked up in the car park at 12.51pm and it looked like Eaglefest with all the cars parked up. Funnily enough I'd managed to park up right next to our neighbours by total fluke! We just hoped that they didn't start thinking that we were stalking them :P. Wendy obviously poured herself a coffee as soon as she could so we saw this as a good time to have lunch.....with the windows wound down. We both heard a weird song and it could only have been 1 thing.....**Ring Ouzel!** We couldn't believe it, but it would've been better to have actually seen it! There was a family sitting having a picnic on the grass in front of us and when they'd finished they took a walk down to the river leaving their small dog behind to mind the car. We eventually said, "Hi." to our neighbours so Neil came over for a chat. Apparently he'd seen an Eagle at very distant range earlier but nothing else and they'd all heard the Ring Ouzel calling from further down the valley. Wendy asked him if anyone could use the eggs we had left and said we would drop them round to them at some point before we left.....waste not want not and all that. They then all bailed into their car and left for their next port of call.

As we started to make a move the dog decided to come over and say, "Hello!" so we gave it a pat on the head thinking it would go back to the car.





Findhorn Valley free pet dog

As we walked down the valley it soon became apparent that we'd acquired a new walking buddy as the dog was happily trotting along next to us. Try as we might we couldn't convince it to do otherwise until it spotted/heard the Dog Kennels to our right and was off to sniff out the compounds and have a chat with dogs instead.

I'd decided not to bring my camera with us, as I was sick of lugging it around for no reason. Clutching at straws I also thought that, as it seems to be a bit of a jinx, maybe we'd get some luck if I left it behind :/. We carried on scanning the sky and also the cliffs but again it felt like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Wendy spotted a bird silhouetted against the sky high up on one of the ridges. It was miles away but everything about its size, shape and behavior screamed Ring Ouzel! It hopped behind the ridge before I had a chance of seeing it but we kept looking and walked further on hoping to catch up with it again. Needless to say we didn't and there was no sign of any Eagles again so we turned round. On the way back to car we approached a couple with a scope so we stopped for a scan of the area they had it pointing in. Just as we did a bird appeared from over the top of the mountain....it was just a Buzzard! Out of the corner of her eye Wendy had spotted a 2<sup>nd</sup> bird behind it and said, "Oh, there's another Buzzard to its left." When we both got our bins onto it our hearts were in our mouths, it wasn't looking good for Buzzard at all and we couldn't believe what we were seeing. Right at the last moment before we'd left a beautiful **Golden Eagle** soared slowly and effortlessly over our heads and we watched it with open mouths until it became a tiny speck on the other side of the valley. We'd been hoping for a better view of an Eagle and this was definitely better than our wildest dreams could have imagined, we could even see its features with our naked eyes. As I was carrying Wendy's camera I swung it round to get a record shot but it really wasn't up to the job and I could've kicked myself for not bringing mine!



Golden Eagle

Grand finales don't come much better than that and even Wendy considered that it deserved a high 5! After she'd 'Whooped' and jumped around we could finally leave happy. We stopped to chat to the couple with the scope, who it turned out were new to birding and didn't even realise that they'd just seen an Eagle and had only ever heard the name Ring Ouzel. Talk about beginners luck! We were so happy to have seen it as we were convinced that we'd failed for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time of our trip :).

Back at the car it was 3.15pm by then and we stopped for a, "Did you see it?" chat about the Eagle with another couple. The bloke told us that they'd also seen 2x sub adults making it 3x Eagles but we're not so sure. Some of the Buzzards knocking about were pretty big or maybe of course we're just idiots and got it wrong ourselves :\. While I was showing the bloke Tomintoul on his map Wendy was having an interesting conversation with his wife. Apparently Loch Garten had opened their Caper watch Hide that morning without putting the news out. They hadn't seen anything and not surprisingly, nobody else had turned up! She also said that the Osprey was back on the nest and had arrived 2 days ago! No news had been put out about that either and the Visitors Centre was still closed until 1<sup>st</sup> April. The only thing was that if their Osprey was back then we had more hope of seeing 1 before we left, which was something we'd completely ruled out until that point.

We drove away happy and nothing else we could think of doing could better what we'd just seen so home was our only other plan. We went via the 'Heather Centre' to pick up some pressies and then the local shop to get something for my tea and were back at HQ by 4.30pm. It was snowing lightly again so Wendy stood outside admiring our surroundings for a bit before going in for tea. After that it was baths, washing/drying, starting the packing and tidying the cottage up a bit. It was still light at 7.05pm so the days were visibly stretching and we really didn't want to leave the next day. We'd found our little piece of heaven in this idyllic spot and we'd had such an amazing time but our time was up. Feeling depressed we were both looking forward to making the most of chilling out with

the fire roaring away for the last time. Unfortunately the wood we'd got from the garage was obviously damp so I just couldn't get it to light so we had to do without. Hopefully it would be dry enough for when the next guests arrived though. With all the chores done and a long day ahead of us we had an early night so we could get going as early as possible the next day and back down to Heysham :{.

### Friday 30<sup>th</sup> March

At 6am we were up and it was another lovely sunny but cold day with fine snow falling again outside. We had the Cresties back but only briefly and there was no sign of the Red Squirrel. We can only think that they'd started to think about heading back to their breeding sites by that point so were busy elsewhere, doing other things. Wendy had made sarnies for the day and the birds were in for a treat as there was loads of left over bread and cheese for them. Wendy heard **Redpoll** calling from the trees at the front of the house and while she was busy I hopped next door to leave our neighbours the eggs we didn't use as our Pine Marten bait and some milk. Wendy could've hung around for ages making the most of the time at the cottage but if we wanted to get down south in daylight we had to get going. With teary eyes she reluctantly waved goodbye to our HQ and we drove away for the last time at 8.15am :{.

My car was reading -3.5C when we arrived at Loch Garten feeders at 8.23am. We were hoping for some last chance Crestie shots but there was a guy in a camper parked up right under the feeding station! He'd obviously slept there the night and was standing waving some kind of Bridge camera up at the feeders. We saw absolutely no point in sticking around as he'd well and truly taken up residence and had hogged the entire area so 2mins later we drove away.

We were at Boat of Garten by 8.32am and it was dead! There was literally nothing around at all so we gave it until 8.54am before calling it a day. We resigned ourselves to the fact that there wasn't going to be any miracles for us to better our Crestie shots. The only other plan I had was to get petrol in Aviemore, so after refueling we went to chance our luck on the path by the River Spey behind the cottage we'd stayed at last year. That was where the Loch Garten Ospreys went to feed, so if there was 1 back already we stood a slight chance, so I parked up at our local from last year the 'Old Bridge Inn'. We scanned the sky while we wandered down the river seeing a **Grey Wagtail** on its banks. There were people staying in our previous cottage but there was no sign of any Osprey.





River Spey

We had another final plan up our sleeves for that though, so it wasn't the last chance saloon.

We left at 9.28am and headed for our last planned stop in Scotland, Loch Insh to see if there was any sign of the Osprey there. Feeling forlorn and depressed we got out of the car and walked through the cemetery to view the Loch and nest. Nothing :( Ah well, we'd tried everything but they just hadn't made it back to their breeding grounds yet and with everywhere still frozen we could only see it as a good thing.



Loch Insh

At 9.50am we left Aviemore behind and headed for the A9 but about 5mins later Wendy spotted Ralia Café, where we'd stopped off last year for her last Cappuccino fix for miles, so I had to stop. I'd hoped to be making good progress by then and this time out was going to slow us down but I knew that if she didn't get that caffeine top up now, she'd be having withdrawal later on :P.

We'd officially left the Highlands by 10.40am and luckily we still had a couple of places to visit to break the tedious journey up a bit. I'd planned to return to the

Black Grouse road on the way down, hoping that the week of thaw might mean that we could access the road we couldn't at the beginning of the week. Not long after we'd turned off the A9 and were heading west into the 'Middle Hills' although I'm not sure what they are officially called.

Now, Wendy doesn't have the best sense of direction so it surprised me when she chirped up with, "Look it's the Co-op I went to on the way up!" We had indeed ended up back at Aberfeldy and this time it was daylight. As we left the town behind we could see a massive river running nearby and Wendy spotted several Goosanders on it, which made us laugh. With rivers like that in Scotland we're not surprised that all the ones that winter in the I.O.M clear off and head up there to breed. We then realized that with everything else going on we'd completely forgotten about Otters and Sea Eagles....Doh! We hadn't even tried or gone to any coastal areas during our week to even have the opportunity. Although it would've been great we weren't that worried, as we knew we'd have a far better chance in May in the Hebrides but saying that though I've probably just jinxed it!

We hit Kenmore at 11.40am where I knew the end/start of the road was but there was still a sign up saying that the road was closed! I couldn't believe it and knew straight away that this meant a lengthy diversion. We would have to retrace our steps back to Aberfeldy for a start, putting at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour onto the journey.....Arrghhhhhh! Firstly though, Wendy wanted to stop to get some pictures of Loch Freuchie on the banks of Kenmore, as it looked so nice.



Loch Freuchie

As we drove off I had my fingers and toes crossed that we'd be able to get onto the road from the other end like I'd planned on the journey up. Looking at the roads compared to when we were last there, most of the snow had gone so it was looking promising. I spotted a very pale bird, which on 1<sup>st</sup> glance looked very interesting but we couldn't say it was anything other than a weird looking leucistic Kestrel.

We finally ended up on our 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt at Amulree at 12.15pm and there was practically no snow left on the road, although the fields were still thick with it. I turned up the road and whereas a week ago it had been a snowdrift it was now



clear. I expected to see a 'Road ahead closed' sign but there was nothing so I decided to keep going unless we did hit a sign, at which point I'd turn back. Hopefully we might have seen a Black Grouse by that point. The first thing we noticed was a sign saying "Warning Grouse on road"! Now that's not something you see every day and it made me feel much more positive. Next we saw a Red Grouse sitting on the wall by the road so I pulled over right next to it and it didn't move! It was too close even for Wendy's gear let alone mine so I pulled out my point and click camera for a laugh and was amazed by the result.



Red Grouse - point and clicked!

I never would've expected a tiny, pocket camera could get something that sharp so it had been money well spent! :). The bird then strutted off down the wall so I decided to get out of the car and use my proper gear on it. The bird was quite happy and practically posed for me and although it was a shame it wasn't a Black Grouse, beggars can't be choosers.





## Red Grouse

Further down the road were 2x **Grey Partridge** in a field, which were a bit far off and into the sun but Wendy grabbed a record shot anyway.



Grey Partridge

Next we drove towards a Loch and Wendy spotted a huge bird sitting at the top of a tree on the Island in the middle. There was a 2<sup>nd</sup> bird hunched up below it too so we stopped for a look and found them to be 2x Red Kites. I pulled over into a layby for a scan but we only saw some Deer on the hills and were quite disappointed at having not seen any Black Grouse at all.



Amulree Road

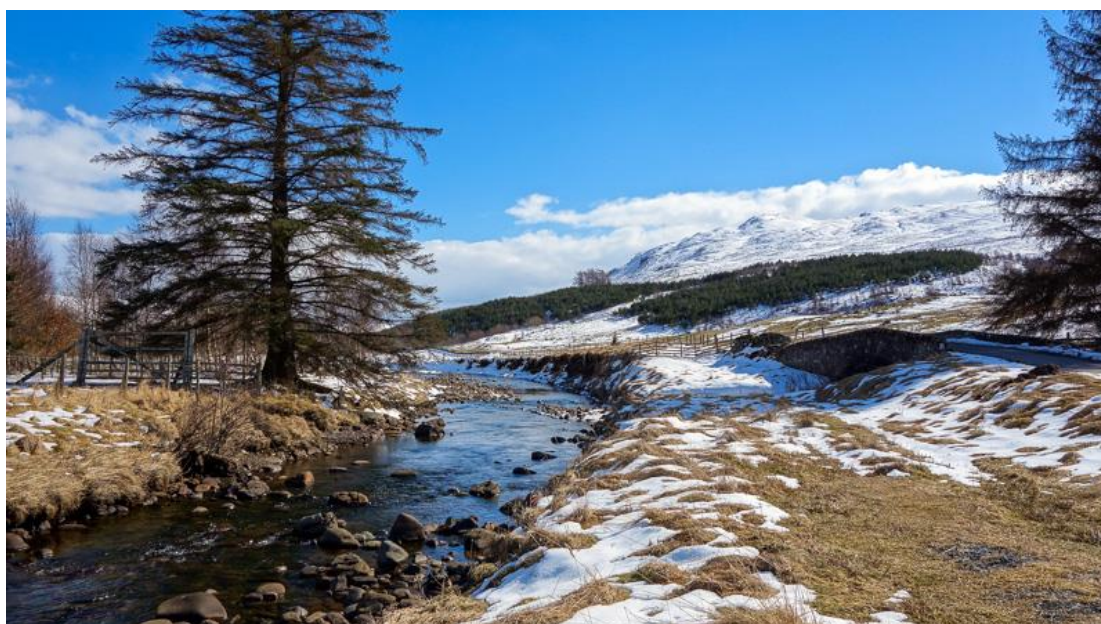
There were plenty of Red, which we could hear calling all around us and we couldn't help but think that we'd have had more luck on our way up, as it was later in the day. Bloody snow! Not wanting to spend too much time there I

turned around and headed back down the road. It was 1.03pm by then and I didn't plan on stopping again for a while so I found another layby to have lunch in. There were some Lapwing in the field next to us, so Wendy hopped out with her camera, ducking down as she went and positioned herself behind the wall, dodging all the Red Grouse poo on the top. They weren't as close as we'd 1<sup>st</sup> thought and too far away for any decent pics so she gave up. One thing we'd noticed all over Scotland was that nearly every field had Lapwing, Curlew or Oystercatcher in them, which is a completely different to those on the Isle of Man, which have none. This confuses me as the fields in both places have livestock grazing them but something is obviously making the Manx fields detrimental to wildlife unfortunately :(.

As we ate our food I hatched a new plan for our last stop off point. Instead of going to Silverdale/Leighton Moss I reckoned Caerlaverock was worth a shot as there was a Green-winged Teal there, which would be another lifer for Wendy. The only problem was that it closes every day at 5pm so we'd probably only get 30mins max there if I put my foot down. Our only hope was that it left its gates open like some reserves do but being a WWT reserve I just couldn't see that happening :(.

Before we left we were both in need of a WC break but there was nothing to hide behind. I decided that I'd go first and stood at the side of car successfully completing my mission without anyone appearing for a change.....now there's a 1<sup>st</sup>! Very pleased with this I opened the back passenger side door thinking that if Wendy opened hers too and went in between them she'd be fine. Wendy didn't look convinced and said, "This road's been strangely quiet for too long, I've got a bad feeling about this." This was her only chance and she had to grab it so she set about her business, much to the relief of her bladder. Seconds later I had some bad news and said, "OMG there's a car coming!" then "OMG make that two!" Neither of us could move through laughing as the cars slowly drove past us with Wendy in near enough full view! When she'd finished she just about managed to plonk herself back onto her seat, with as much grace as a Walrus, still doubled up with tears streaming down her face. I was still killing myself as well, maybe it was the tiredness creeping in but we couldn't stop for about 5 minutes! Still, at least it hadn't been a Tours Coach or something :D. After getting our heads back together we were ready to go at 1.40pm with the biggest stretch of our journey still ahead of us....yawn :(.

I took 1 last photo of the amazing scenery before we set off.

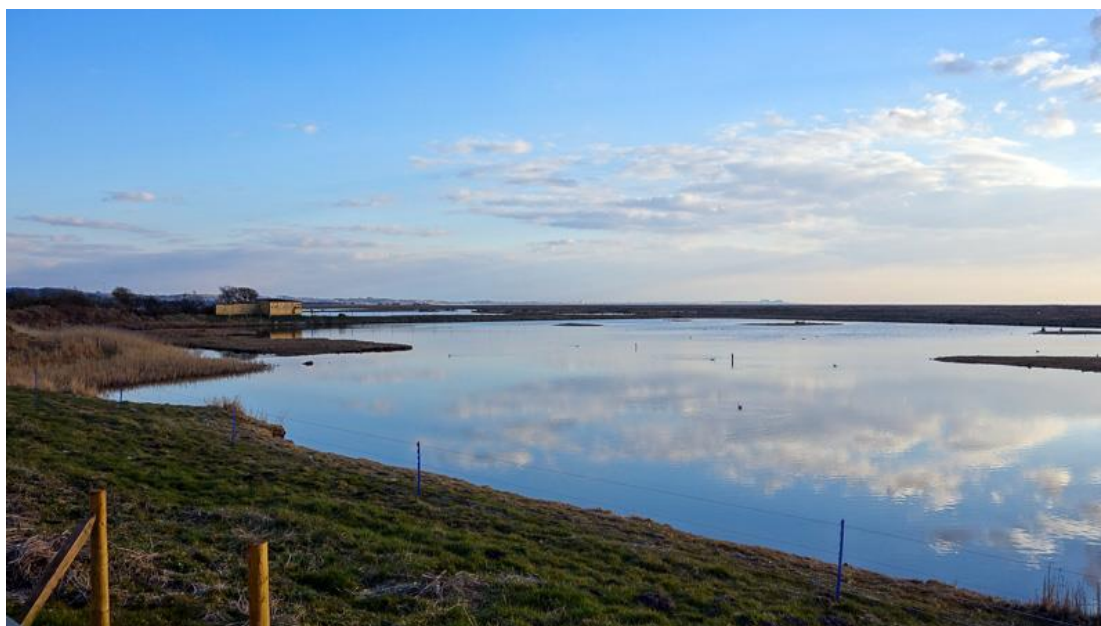




## Amulree area

By the time we hit Stirling at 2.18pm the temperature in my car was saying 6.5C. We hadn't seen anything much above 0C during our week so this looked practically tropical! We were just north of Glasgow when Wendy spotted some **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** in a field at the side of the road, which were new for the trip. At 3.09pm we passed the sign for Dumfries and Galloway so we could finally start to relax a bit and when Wendy saw the sign for Annandale Services she couldn't resist taking advantage. As is tradition, I parked up at 3.20pm and she skipped in for a less risky WC break and another caffeine fix. She'd only had ½ a cheese sarnie and some crisps so far so she also bought a small portion of fries to share and keep us going until teatime. Although I had enough chicken and cheese left to make 2 sarnies out of she'd only had enough cheese to make 1 sarnie, so had to save the other ½ for later! After a well-earned break we set off again at 3.46pm and although it was getting quite late we still had loads to pack in to the remainder of our holiday. It was now obvious that it was far too late to visit Caerlaverock so it was back to our 1<sup>st</sup> plan of doing the usual but this time we had enough daylight left to pay another place a visit as well. We passed the 'Welcome to England - Cumbria' sign at 4.06pm and breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

It had been a very long day but we pulled up in the car park at Silverdale at 5.10pm hoping that our 2<sup>nd</sup> wind would kick in some time soon. It was looking quite busy as the car park was nearly full and there were a good few people wandering around. We set off to the 1<sup>st</sup> Hide and sat down to view the pools.



Silverdale

This was the 1<sup>st</sup> time we'd been anywhere coastal during the whole week, which is mainly why we didn't see an Otter, so we had a whole new set of birds still to be added to our trip list. We kicked off with **Little Egret**, **Spotted Redshank** and the newly returned **Avocets** while further away we also found good numbers of **Shoveler**, **Pintail** and **Black-tailed Godwits**. We moved on to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hide, which was meant to be good for hunting Barn Owl but we found nothing new there. We'd become so used to wandering round Scotland with other like-minded and normal looking people but we'd found ourselves back to the reality of being surrounded by the weirdo's of the Birding world. With the sun already sinking behind the hill and the light starting to fade we decided that



we'd better put our skates on if we were to have any luck at our last stop off. Back at the car at 5.40pm the temperature was still reading a baking hot 5.5C :O! If we'd still been in Scotland we'd have already hit the -2C mark at least.

We arrived at Leighton Moss at 5.43pm and were expecting the gate at the side of the Visitors Centre to be open as usual so we could park up. The gate was closed and it looked as though there was building work going on so we had to use the main car park over the road. That car park is normally locked up at the end of the day along with the Visitors Centre but parking would be still available round the back of the building. That worked a treat for us when we arrived because we could have our tea while watching the feeders for Marsh Tit, the sky for Bats and have the use of the WCs right by the car. I left my car keeping my fingers crossed that nobody locked the gate while we were gone and left us stranded there for the night or that it didn't get nicked, as there's about 20 signs warning of car thieves working in the area! :\. When we'd crossed over into the old car park we saw a huge board with their plan on it. It was to become a new ornamental garden and the work was already well underway. We're not sure about anyone else but we kind of liked it the way it was but obviously they've set out to improve it for visitors or to appeal to other types of people. It does look like it'll be nice and hopefully we'll have got over losing our cushy little spot next time we visit. We scanned the seemingly greatly reduced number of feeders, as well as the trees nearby but there was absolutely no sign of any Marsh Tits or much else for that matter. The only new thing we found was a huge **Rat** under the main feeding station!

Our 1<sup>st</sup> port of call was Lillian's Hide where we added **Gadwall**, **Pochard** and Wendy spotted a nice **Marsh Harrier** sitting in a tree out in the reed beds.



Leighton Moss

With time running out we hotfooted it over to Griesdale Hide hearing the loud blast of a **Cetti's Warbler** on the way. From the Hide itself we found nothing new but there was another 2x Marsh Harriers and a male Goosander. We thought the area looked great for Barn Owl and the light was perfect for them to be out hunting but there was still nothing.

It's quite a walk to the Public Hide and at one point you come out of the reserve and walk at the side of the road to join up with the next footpath. A Blackbird flew across the road and landed in the hedge, which caught Wendy's eye. She was laughing at it, as amusingly it had the white bib of a Ring Ouzel but was obviously still just an aberrant Blackbird nevertheless. We soon joined the footpath down to the Hide and heard the unmistakable and ear piercing, squealing pig sound of a **Water Rail** from deep in the reeds. There'd been recent reports of Bittern booming and Otter from the hide but we hadn't heard anything vaguely resembling a Bittern since arriving so we weren't feeling optimistic. Otter is something which we seem to be able to avoid incredibly well so weren't hedging any bets for that either but.....you never know! We sat down in the Public Hide and peered out into the near darkness seeing nothing but 2x Great-crested Grebes so we were up and out again within seconds. We had to move fast if we were to get to the last Hide before it was too dark. After practically race walking all the way and hoping to flush a Long-eared or Tawny Owl we arrived at the Lower Hide at 7.07pm.

We sat down and found that it was by then too dark to see the birds.....Uh Oh! I got quite excited when I spotted something on the ground outside the Hide but after I'd got Wendy onto it we found out it was just a Common Snipe. There were another 2x Great-crested Grebes and a load of black silhouette ducks roosting for the night. We'd managed to keep on Birding until the bitter end but with it now being totally impossible we packed up and headed back to the car. We'd started to realise that we were incredibly hungry and thirsty and walked back at a pace even quicker than we'd set on the way there. Heading back towards the Public Hide Wendy heard something resembling a Goose, looked up and thought, "What the.....?" She pointed upwards and after our brains had processed what we were seeing I shrieked, "**Bittern!**" Unbelievable! It flew slowly and clumsily across the track, right over our heads so we ran for it and dived back into the Hide to see if we could still see it. It must've gone down into the reeds because there was no sign of it anywhere but had been brilliant to see and also to hear it making a different call from the more familiar 'Boom'. With that last bit of unexpected excitement we raced back up to the road feeling happier. Ok, we'd not found or heard a single Owl yet down here but there was always the drive into Arnside for that, as a last resort.

As we approached the end of the track, just before the road, Wendy stopped dead in her tracks, randomly pointing while looking at the ground and said, "Hear that? We waited for a moment and were rewarded by the calls of a **Tawny Owl**. Yey.....finally :). We were back at the car at 7.40pm and fortunately the car park was still open so we hadn't been locked in and the car was still there.....Phew! I opened the boot up and dug out my camera bag and packed away all our gear while Wendy rummaged round for our change of clothes. It was time to get out of our Arctic clothes and into more normal clobber, as our last stop of the day was the Pub. After fumbling about in the dark to get changed we sat down to eat our remaining food. This consisted of a shared packet of Quavers with my cheese sarnie while Wendy had the other ½ of hers. I'd have given her some of mine but it wasn't veggie so she wouldn't have eaten it! It wasn't much but it did the job and would tide us over :P. We noticed that the temperature was 3.5C, which was still warmer than at any point up in Scotland but we'd have gladly turned around and gone back! Post holiday blues had well and truly kicked in for Wendy and she'd started to daydream of taking a year out to go travelling, just following our noses, in a Campervan. The fact that she'd have to win the lottery

1<sup>st</sup> put a dampener on her fantasy and with that we left at 8.15pm. We had our eyes peeled for the white flash of a Barn Owl as we drove away and carried on down the narrow country roads.

I don't think we've ever arrived in Arnside as early as 8.30pm before but with it being dark we had no other suggestions. We crossed over the road and walked into our local 'The Albion' to find it absolutely chokka! The restaurant was rammed and we had no chance of getting our usual seat in the nice dark corner :(. The new Landlord was certainly making the place work for him and was pulling in more punters than ever. He even had the guy with dreads, who's always there when we go in, working for him behind the bar. Wendy ordered the drinks and was asked if we'd be dining there, as if not it would be appreciated if we'd go into the Public bar to free up the restaurant. She instantly told them that we weren't eating and while we waited for our drinks I had a brainwave. Having hardly eaten anything all day I quickly said, "Get some chips!" thinking that if we did we wouldn't have to go next door. Wendy wasn't up for it though, after saying that we weren't eating, and didn't really want more chips so after we'd got our drinks we opened the door into the back bar and peered in. OMG it was packed too! The only seats were at the far end of the bar, which would make us reluctant 'Bar Flies' for the night.....Urrrghhhh! With 2hrs 45mins to kill we perched ourselves on the very hard and tall barstools with our legs dangling like small children in highchairs. We'd hoped to be able to just veg out, sit in comfort and write some notes to conclude our trip with but in these conditions it was a bit tricky so we ended up just zonking out instead. Wendy started to wonder whether we'd managed to hit even 100 birds during the week and settled on just under while I went for a more optimistic 102. A quick tally on my iphone, which at 10% was running out of battery charge, came out as 106! I'd have to check properly when we got home as our brains were fried and what we had/hadn't seen was all becoming a bit hazy by then. It was still better than we'd both thought and although we never go away with quantity in mind it's still a good feeling when we break the 100 mark :).

We were both feeling quite spritely until around 9.30pm, when I dropped off a cliff and started to flag. The Public bar was even busier by then and it was standing room only so we'd been lucky to get our seats at all. Wendy decided to have a look next door, as she reckoned the restaurant would've cleared, and sure enough it was loads quieter. She came back to get me and we moved our drinks through and sat in a corner by the window in peace. Obviously I wasn't drinking, as I still had to get us to Heysham, so when Wendy came back with some fancy £4.95 Strawberry Beer for me I had to decline. It just meant all the more for her though so she didn't complain and it's a good job she liked it as she'd also bought herself one to drink while we were waiting to board the boat. By 11.17pm and after nearly 3hrs I'd had enough so we left for Heysham slightly confused as to when we had to be there with the clocks going back an hour at 2am. All the way out of Arnside we were again hoping for a Barn Owl but I think our luck had run out hours ago at Leighton Moss. We used to always see Barn Owl around there but these days we rarely do, which can't be a good sign especially as it was such a calm night.

At 12am we joined the tiny queue at Heysham waiting to board so Wendy cracked open her 2<sup>nd</sup> strawberry beer. She hadn't taken any Stugeron because there wasn't even the faintest breath of wind....but we were just waiting for it to pick up for our crossing! She still wanted to be able to sleep on the boat and I



think that last beer did the job a bit too well as not long after drinking it she reclined her seat and fell asleep. The announcement to board came at 1.25am and I couldn't for the life of me wake her up, I tried just about everything.....except a slap hahaha! Eventually a very tired and grumpy Wendy woke up as I parked up on the car deck. I tried to keep her awake, as we had to find our final burst of energy to climb up the 100 flights of stairs to get our cabin key. Totally exhausted we made it to the cabin and although Wendy was well away in the land of nod I was still awake when we departed at 1.50am, which was 30mins earlier than scheduled. I eventually got to sleep too until we both woke up just before docking at 6.06am, which was really 5.06 when you take the clock changing into account. The wind had started to pick up so we knew we were nearly home and, as we seem to be cursed by rough crossings, we were very surprised that it hadn't started up when we were in Arnside! When we disembarked at 6.12am the temperature in my car read a very civilized 7.5C but for some strange reason it felt colder.

We were home by 6.20am to the absolutely freezing house and we felt colder than we had done all week. As usual all our thoughts of going back to bed went out the window and Wendy started unpacking before frantically starting to write the article while I unpacked all the photography equipment then began going through the 1000's of pics we'd taken. We certainly had our work cut out with this one, having only 1 month to get it done before our next trip. This would mean another article to write plus 1000's more photos to go through.....hopefully!

Wendy unwrapped the card she'd bought at the Cairngorms gift shop and wrote a quick thank you note to the Black-throated Thrush lady. She'd been a real star to open up her home to complete strangers and Wendy hadn't wanted it to go unnoticed. She gave it to me to post when I nipped out to wash my car and get the brown salt and mud off. While I was out Wendy had a phone call from the guy who owned Clunymhore. He'd phoned to say thanks for leaving the place so spotlessly clean and said that not many people would be so thoughtful. He told her that she wouldn't believe the state some people see fit to leave it in so she thanked him for letting her know that everything was OK and said that we wouldn't have dreamt of leaving it any other way. How nice of him? He then went on to say that we'd be welcome back anytime so we just might have to take him up on that. It had been without a doubt the best place we've stayed in Scotland to date and if it'd had Wifi it would be our dream home! :).

I'd driven just 1,180 miles on our trip, which was the least ever for a Scotland holiday, we'd done less walking than usual and our trip list seemed well down compared to most of our past trips. Despite these facts it felt like we'd done loads over the week and we'd certainly not been disappointed or missed anything out...apart from Otter and Sea Eagle of course. We'd noticed a definite increase in the number of Buzzards around but maybe that was due to the bad weather holding them back from breeding or maybe, just maybe, it's a sign that they're simply doing well up there and prosecutions on gamekeepers are starting to have an affect. As it was still snowing the temperature had always been very low but our tactic to 'wear as many clothes as possible at once' seemed to have done a brilliant job of keeping us warm. After walking round for a week feeling like the Marshmallow Man from Ghostbusters it was nice to finally shed some of those layers and be able to move freely again! We just wished we'd used the heated hand and foot warmers more often instead of fighting it and saving them

so we didn't run out....or was it forgetting we had them? If there was a time during the week when we'd needed them it was when we were standing outside on top of Cairngorm....Doh! Being in -10C (not including wind chill) was the coldest either of us had ever been before and although it had been a new experience we can't say we're in any great hurry to repeat it. Unfortunately we'd missed out on Osprey but there'd been no sign of any having returned in the UK that week, apart from the Loch Garten bird, which had been kept very quiet. As the Visitor Centre was still closed until 1<sup>st</sup> April it wasn't viewable anyway and the chances of us tripping over it while it was out feeding were slim. The trip had possibly been our best yet and had gone without a hitch despite the snow and cold. Apart from the odd twinge from her back Wendy had come out totally unscathed whereas I'd skillfully managed to injure 1) my knee – again! 2) my ankle – not sure how! 3) my groin – from race-walking round Leighton Moss!

A couple of days after we'd come home I received an email from the BT Thrush lady, thanking us for the card and it made for a sickening read. The Thrush had returned about 30mins after everyone had gone and continued to visit her garden for the next 2days! She was so apologetic for it not putting in an appearance for anyone that day, as she really wanted us all to see it too. She said she'd thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience but was now glad to have her house back to herself. Obviously it wasn't her fault and it's all just part of the Twitching gamble, you take your chance and the rest is up to the bird and luck, which we definitely don't have much of. All we can say is, "AAARRRRGGGHHHHHHH!"

We didn't really come away with a 'bird of the trip' as the views we had of the Smew and Taiga Bean Goose were so bad. As always though the Red Squirrels and Cresties stole the show for us both and remain our firm favourites. We're still to get those Crestie shots we have pictured in our minds but maybe that's something to look forward to next time. We'd ended our trip list with 106 birds, which was surprisingly more than we'd estimated when we were in the pub.

They say that familiarity breed's contempt but I challenge anyone to become contemptuous of The Highlands. Even after our 3<sup>rd</sup> trip it's such an amazingly vast and diverse place with the most amazing wildlife and breathtaking scenery that we can't wait to go back. I've even managed to persuade my Mum and Dad to go there finally. When either of us wins the lottery there's definitely a holiday home or Campervan just waiting to be bought.....dream on :(.

## Trip List

Mute Swan	Cormorant	Great Black-backed Gull	Great Tit
<b>Bean Goose</b>	Bittern	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Crested Tit
Pink-footed Goose	Little Egret	Stock Dove	Coal Tit
Greylag Goose	Grey Heron	Woodpigeon	Willow Tit
Canada Goose	Red Kite	Collared Dove	Nuthatch
Shelduck	Marsh Harrier	Tawny Owl	Treecreeper
Wigeon	Sparrowhawk	Short-eared Owl	Jay
Gadwall	Buzzard	Kingfisher	Magpie
Teal	Golden Eagle	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Jackdaw
Mallard	Kestrel	Skylark	Rook
Pintail	Merlin	Meadow Pipit	Carion Crow
Shoveler	Peregrine	Grey Wagtail	Raven
Pochard	Water Rail	Pied Wagtail	Starling
Tufted Duck	Moorhen	Dipper	House Sparrow

Goldeneye	Coot	Wren	Chaffinch
<b>Smew</b>	Oystercatcher	Dunnoch	Brambling
Goosander	Avocet	Robin	Greenfinch
Red Grouse	Lapwing	Ring Ouzel	Goldfinch
Ptarmigan	Snipe	Blackbird	Siskin
Black Grouse	Black-tailed Godwit	Song Thrush	Linnet
Capercaillie	Curlew	Redwing	Lesser Redpoll
Red-legged Partridge	Spotted Redshank	Mistle Thrush	Common Crossbill
Grey Partridge	Redshank	Cetti's Warbler	Bullfinch
Pheasant	Black-headed Gull	Goldcrest	Snow Bunting
Black-throated Diver	Common Gull	Long-tailed Tit	Yellowhammer
Little Grebe	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Blue Tit	Reed Bunting
Great Crested Grebe	Herring Gull		