



TRIP REPORT ~ SCOTLAND June 28 - July 12, 2003

Leaders: Adrian Binns with Ian Ford (Highlands) and Hugh Harrop (Shetlands)

Itinerary:

- Day 1 ~ Aberdeen to Nethybridge and vicinity
- Day 2 ~ Castle Grant; Tulloch Moor; Abernethy Forest; Broomhill Bridge; Dufftown
Glenfiddich Distillery
- Day 3 ~ Cairn Gorm; Loch Morlich; Loch Insh; Aviemore Cliffs; Lochen Aviemore
- Day 4 ~ Movern - Corran & Lochaline Ferry; Isle of Mull - Grass Point, Quarry, Loch
Na Keal
- Day 5 ~ Brae of Abernethy; Loch Lochindorb; Findhorn Valley
- Day 6 ~ Tulloch Moor; Spey Bay; Loch Oire; Loch Spynie; Lossiemouth Estuary;
Cooper Park Pond, Elgin
- Day 7 ~ Loch Ness; Urquhart Castle; Longman Outfall; Black Isle - Chanonry Point,
Avoch, Corrachie Framlands, Munloch Bay; Culloden Moor
- Day 8 ~ Nethybridge to Aberdeen; Jarlshof & Scatness Bay; Mousa
- Day 9 ~ Sumburgh Head; Mossy Hill; Dalesetter; Clumie Loch; Crofthouse
- Day 10~ Boat around Bressay & Noss; Loch of Tingwall; Scalloway Castle & Harbor;
Quendale Watermill
- Day 11~ Mainland to Yell Ferry; Fetlar - Loch Funzie, Tronamies, Airstrip; Ferry to
Unst - Uyeasound Pools, Border Stubble Standing Rock; Westing Beach
- Day 12~ Hermaness Nature Reserve; Keen of Hamar; Baltasound Sound
- Day 13~ Boat from Mid Yell along west side of Unst to Muckle Flugga and Burrafirth;
Transfer from Unst to Sumburgh
- Day 14~ Eshaness - Calders Geo; Tangwick Haa Museum; Ronies Hill & Voe; Old
Scatness Broch

The stunning scenery was evident as soon as we entered the Highlands and remained with us throughout the trip. From the purples of the heather moors, to the varying shades of green and brown in the glens, to the stately Scots pines of the Caledonian Forest, to the ragged coastal outline and vast expanses of treeless landscape dotted with wildflowers and peat bogs in the Shetlands. At every turn it seemed to subtly change and left one wondering what was around the next corner. Golden fields of rape and barley; colorful verges with foxgloves, ox-eyed daisies and red campion; fragrant, lesser butterfly and heath-spotted orchids amongst cross-leaved and bell heather in the Highlands. Meadows of ragged robins and meadow buttercups; wet meadows of bog asphodel and cotton grass; Edmondston's chickweed and the distinctive form growths of other plants such as sea plantain adapted to the harsh conditions of the serpentine barren on the Keen of Hamar, in the Shetlands This natural beauty is what makes Scotland one of the most beautiful destinations to explore – and explore we certainly did.

Our visit coincided with the breeding season and birds with chicks were everywhere. Spotted Flycatchers were busy making short sorties from fence posts to feed their young; Northern Wheatears were begging for food as they followed their parents around; Red-throated Loon chicks stayed close to their parents; Meadow Pipits and Common Redstarts carried caterpillars to well camouflaged nests; we watched a Slavonian Grebe chick calling for its mother's help, before finally making it out of shallow reeds and into the

open water, where she proceeded to dive for fish and feed it; a Dotterel kept its chick at a safe distance as we lunched on the Cairn Gorm plateau; House Martins returned to their mud nests in the eaves of houses; parent Whooper Swans, one at each end, swam in a line with their 6 cygnets in between them; Lapwings were calling their day old spotted young to safety; 3 well grown Peregrine fledglings were sleeping besides their aerie, three-quarters of the way up a steep cliff; we had a close look at a Great Skua chick with its egg tooth still intact; Puffins bringing beak-fulls of sandeels back to their burrows and of course the seabird colonies where in full swing, parents sitting on eggs or with young birds. This year they seemed to be running several weeks behind schedule, no doubt due a poor sandeel season.

In the open landscape, camouflage and survival techniques are most important to these birds, as they stay well aware of possible predators. The top predator in the Shetlands is the Great Skua, replacing the raptors, Peregrine, Merlin, Sparrowhawk, harriers, eagles and owls, that can be found in the Highlands. Eider ducks with their brown plumage keep their chicks close to the rocky shoreline in order to blend in. The diminutive Storm-petrel, with its bat-like flight, returned to its nest under the cover of dark. Gull and tern chicks, as well as their eggs, are covered in small blotches blending in perfectly amongst small rocks and pebbles. Game birds and their mottled plumages seem to magically vanish in front of you. Red Grouse kept their chicks out of sight in the dense heather at the first sign of danger. Though a hen Ptarmigan with 6 chicks seemed oblivious to our presence, they were often hard to detect amongst the lichen covered rocks and Pheasants and Red-legged Partridges weary of our presence, were soon "lost" in the tall grasses.

Other highlights included a Short-eared Owl seen very well flying besides the road and landing on a fence post to preen; a White-tailed Eagle sitting majestically on a dead snag above its nest; seeing dozens of European Storm-petrels circling the Iron Age Broch at Mousa and actually picking one up in the hand as it perched on the stone wall, to see its small tube-nose and webbed feet; we got stunning looks at the "old horse of the woods", as the Capercaillie is locally known, at close quarters amongst the bracken displaying its throat hackles and fanned tail; hundreds of Gannets circled over our heads as we sailed around the northern tip of Britain; Atlantic Puffins exploding off the cliff tops in unison and heading out to sea; 4 or 5 Great Skuas chased Gannets, to get them to cough up fish; we followed a Black-throated Loon as it patrolled its way around Loch Lochindorb with amazing speed before finally pausing to preen, and then taking flight only to be lost from view behind the ruined castle in the middle of the Loch; Skylarks "skylarking" for what seemed like an eternity; Red-necked Phalaropes frantically swimming along the edge of the loch picking off midges from rocks and vegetation; Bottle-nosed Dolphins leaping out the water at Chanonry Point; an Otter playing along the coast of Mull; Red Squirrel's with their bushy cream colored tails played hide and seek behind pine trunks; 4 Badgers searching for grubs within feet of our hide and several butterflies including Speckled Wood, Dark Green Fritillary and the colorful Small Tortoiseshell were seen well.

The Highlands are synonymous with three things. Being the capital of the whiskey trade, it was appropriate that we visited the Glenfiddich distillery. The tour provided an insight into the long process of single malt whiskey making and ended with a wee dram – though the newly marketed liquor may have been more popular than the malt! And of course how could we not search Loch Ness for "Nessie"? Though our very pleasant boat ride (along with a coach load of Spaniards) did not produce a sighting (what a surprise) we did get to visit the ruins of Urquhart Castle on the western shore. Here the castle changed hands many times over the course of 6 centuries as kings and clans fought for control of the Great Glen. And finally, on the wet moors of Culloden the dreams of a separate Scottish state came to a crashing halt on a bleak winters day in 1746, as the Duke of Cumberland's Hanoverian army soundly defeated Bonnie Prince Charlie's Jacobite forces. Being further north and closer to the Scandinavian coast, the Shetlands have a history dating back to Neolithic times, some three thousand years before the Vikings. Visits to Jarlshof and Old Scatness revealed ancient Iron Age brochs in various states of discovery, but none where more impressive than the 43' tall Mousa broch, with its 5' thick double walls and narrow staircase. This certainly was a different way of life to the Earl of Orkney's castle at Scalloway, built some 400 years ago, and the lives crofters led over the past several centuries.....This certainly was the ultimate Scottish natural history trip.