

SCOTLAND IN STYLE

JUNE 3 - 11, 2008



© Jessica Thayer

Juvenile Gannet

**LEADERS:
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TOUR REPORT
SCOTLAND IN STYLE
June 3–11, 2008

By Peter Roberts

This was the third and last week of VENT's Scottish tour program in 2008. We'd had perfect weather during our first Scotland in Style tour, followed by pretty-near perfect weather (barring the first day) on the Scottish Islands Cruise. This last week in the Highlands carried on in the same vein, with great, clear, dry, mostly sunny weather right up until our transfers to the airport on the last day. That should put a stop to those who mock and make fun of Scottish weather!

Our small, compatible group settled into our comfortable hotel for six full days based in the charming ancient market town of Grantown-On-Spey. The wide range of interests and levels of keenness (measured by how many opted for 5:00 a.m. starts for pre-breakfast birding!) was well-catered to. Many were new to Scotland and the Highlands, and enjoyed the varied scenery of high peaks, extensive moorlands, and Caledonian pine woodland; the stunning coastal scenery of cliffs, inlets, and offshore islands; and the fast-flowing rivers.

A tour repeated soon after another (just two weeks earlier) is inevitably judged by the first's performance. Happily, we managed to repeat many of the first tour's successes. Perhaps the two most wanted birds were Scottish Crossbill and Capercaillie. The crossbills performed well again, giving most people at least brief, perched, scope views. Capercaillie was hardest by far, and the amount of perseverance put in to seeking this elusive bird of the forests was impressive. It was frustrating taking the group to all the places I'd staked out a month or so before. On the very last day at least some of us got flight views of a female flushed as we quietly walked the forest trails.

Other classic northerly species popped up more readily: the wonderful Rock Ptarmigan on the top of Cairngorm and Willow Ptarmigan with chicks on Dava Moor; the displaying Black Grouse in early morning and Eurasian Woodcock in late evening over the heather moors; and White-throated Dipper, Ring Ouzel, Crested Tit, Horned Grebe, Arctic Loon, Golden Eagle, Osprey, Red Kite, and more were all found where looked for.

As only two members of our group had been on the cruise the previous week, most were keen to see the classic selection of North Atlantic seabirds at a breeding colony. They were delighted with the visit to Troup Head, on the north Aberdeenshire coast, with its wonderful mixed colony of Northern Gannets, Common Murres (including those lovely "bridled" types), Razorbills, Northern Fulmars, European Shags, and Black-legged Kittiwakes, plus the star attraction—Atlantic Puffins, with at least one watched full-frame in the scope.

Between the birding, some historical visits were slotted in (many of these lovely castles having a great range of common species in the lovely gardens and surroundings). Culloden, where Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Scots of the Jacobite Rising were finally defeated by the English forces in 1746, produced a fine male Reed Bunting. Cawdor Castle, a fairytale home of the Thanes of Cawdor since 1370, was a fascinating place to wander through, with its towers and drawbridge and beautiful gardens with tits, thrushes, and finches nesting. Brodie Castle was a very grand and imposing fortified tower house with numerous extensions through the centuries. The flexible approach to this tour was never better used than on our day on the west coast, where we lucked-out and saw the huge White-tailed Eagle quickly, giving us time to make a first-ever visit to the lovely, almost semi-tropical gardens of Inverewe.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours

SCOTLAND IN STYLE

(A Birds and History Break in the Highlands)

June 4th - 11th, 2008

Tour Leader

Peter Roberts

Tour Participants

Anna & Guillermo Barney

Margaret Dennis

Anni Gossman

Mary Jane Kaplan

Meredith & Malcolm Silver

TOUR NOTES

June 3: Travel from United States. Some of the group were starting out from the United States today, while others had arrived early into the UK

June 4: Arrival in Inverness. Transfer from the Cruise docking at Oban for Peter, Meredith and Malcolm. Pick up in Inverness and Airport for others. Birding Loch Indorb and Dava Moor (Willow Ptarmigan, Osprey & Arctic Loon) en route to Grantown On Spey and the Garth Hotel.

June 5: Cairngorm Plateau. Pre-breakfast at Tulloch Moor for Black Grouse. After breakfast to Avielochan (Horned Grebe), then up Funicular to Cairngorm Plateau (Rock Ptarmigan), finishing on River Spey in evening (White-throated Dipper).

June 6: Strathconon & Culloden. Pre-breakfast in Grantown Woods (Scottish Crossbill), then to Strathconon for the morning (Golden Eagle). Afternoon at Culloden Battlefield site.

June 7: Troup Head & Spey Bay. To Troup Head for breeding seabirds, returning via Spey Bay.

June 8: Cawdor Castle & Black Isle. Pre-breakfast in Abernethy Forest (Scottish Crossbill). Morning at Cawdor Castle then to Black Isle - Chanonry Point (Bottle-nosed Dolphins); Udale Bay (shorebirds and waterfowl). Tulloch Moor in late evening (Eurasian Woodcock, Black Grouse).

June 9: West Coast of Scotland. Drive to West coast at Dundonnell and Gruinard Island (White-tailed Eagle). Afternoon at Inverewe Gardens. Return via Loch Maree and Ben Eighe National Nature Reserve.

June 10: Local birding and Brodie Castle. Pre-breakfast birding near Slochd (Capercaillie). Morning in Grantown Woods, then Lochindorb (Arctic Loon and Willow Ptarmigan). Afternoon Brodie Castle then Findhorn Bay.

June 11: Homeward. Various transfers to Inverness airport.

Note: The checklist below shows all species of birds, mammals seen on the tour. The following abbreviations are used:

* = recorded that day, but not counted

(I) = Introduced

(E) = Endemic to Scotland

h = heard only

y = young

[] = dead

L = Leader only