

## Wildlife in Speyside

Speyside is in the heart of the Cairngorms, Britain's largest, and most spectacular, National Park covering 1400 square miles. With a wide range of habitats and four of the country's five highest peaks, much of it is as untamed as anywhere in the world. More than a quarter of the UK's most threatened habitats and species occur here making it perhaps the most important area for wildlife conservation in Britain.

The diversity of wildlife here is well known amongst enthusiasts who come here from all over the country and from abroad and wherever you go in the area there is great wildlife to look out for.

Starting low down, a walk amidst the beautiful Scots pines of the ancient Caledonian forest can be very rewarding. Some of these old trees are more the shape of old oaks than pines and were the parents of all the younger trees surrounding them. Scottish Crossbills live entirely on the seeds prised from their cones and can be seen pulling the cones off the branches before trapping them under a foot to work on them. These forests, with their understory of Bilberry and Heather, are great for insect eating birds like Willow Warblers, Tree Pipits and Redstarts and are the only woodlands in the UK where you can find the delightful Crested Tit. It is best located by learning the call, a rolling trill, or in winter it will be amongst the Blue Tits, Coal Tits and Great Tits in mixed flocks, often with Goldcrests and Treecreepers too. Perhaps the hardest to find of the exciting birds here, is the enormous Capercaillie. Numbers of these huge grouse have dropped alarmingly in recent years but they are still here in small numbers, though getting a good view of this incredibly shy bird is always tricky.



*Crossbill – Simon Eaves*



*Red Squirrel – Simon Eaves*

These forests are also home to some exciting mammals, the easiest to see being the Red Squirrel. There are no Grey Squirrels here so the Reds are still doing well and may be seen scampering along the branches or more likely on someone's bird feeder.

You would have to be very lucky to glimpse the Pine Marten, a wonderfully agile member of the weasel family that will even chase Red Squirrels through the high branches. They are however very partial to peanuts and raisins and there are places where they come to feed on food put out for them (see links below for further details).



*Pine Marten – Mark Hamblin*

These forests are the place where the first returning pair of Ospreys chose to nest after an absence of over 40 years. Protected by the RSPB at Loch Garten they have increased so that there are now over a hundred pairs, with the chance you might see one fishing in almost any loch or river in the region.

*Red Deer – Simon Eaves*



Heading up into the glens it is always worth keeping an eye on the skyline. Red Deer spend the summer high up on the slopes and look fabulous with their enormous antlers, silhouetted against the sky. It is worth checking any birds of prey cruising along these ridges as, though many will be Buzzards, there is always the chance of a Golden Eagle hunting for Red Grouse or Mountain Hares. Red Kites are spreading into the area from a release scheme on the Black Isle and Peregrines circle high above, scanning for pigeons crossing the valley. In the gulleys where streams splash down the mountainsides are nesting Ring Ouzels, the mountain blackbird, with their slow

rather mournful song, and on the grassy slopes are Wheatears, Stonechats and countless Meadow Pipits. Dippers, Grey Wagtails and Common Sandpipers nest along the rivers and are easily spotted along the edges of any stony river while Goosander search for fish in the fast flowing current. There are large colonies of Common Gulls on some of the larger shingle banks and these are also the nesting place of Oystercatchers, Ringed Plovers and even a few Common Terns.

*Red-throated Diver– Mark Denman*



On the moorland and hill tops listen out for the plaintive call of Golden Plover as they perform their beautiful spring display flight. Merlin are here too and a few pairs of nesting Dunlin, while on even smaller lochans there is always the chance of finding Red-throated Divers. These birds will nest on these smaller lochans, then fly to larger lochs or even to the sea to find food. This is the only part of Britain where beautiful Slavonian Grebes build their nests, though it helps to know where to look if you want see one, as many suitable looking lochs are ignored. Their brilliant yellow crests make them stand out in the breeding season and they can be remarkably tame.

Higher still, amidst the snow patches of the arctic-alpine Cairngorm plateau, a small number of Snow Buntings build their nests. These are rare breeding birds in Britain, only nesting in the highest mountains. Ptarmigan are also here; easy to see in the spring when they are calling and displaying but incredibly well camouflaged when they are not. They change colour through the seasons, moulting into pure white during the winter, but are the same colour as the granite rocks in summer.

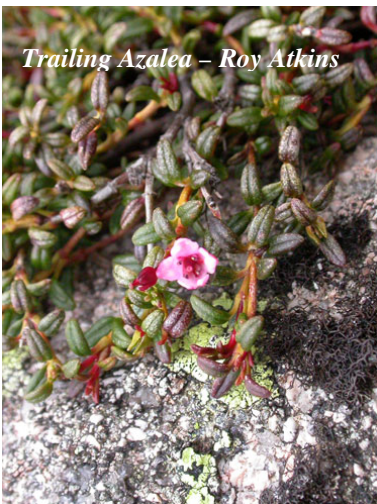
*Ptarmigan – Simon Eaves*



*Dotterel – Simon Eaves*



*Trailing Azalea – Roy Atkins*



Dotterel arrive on the tops in May and after laying the eggs the female may well move on, leaving the male to raise the chicks while she finds a new mate in the Norwegian mountains.

Delightful alpine flowers like Moss Campion, Roseroot, Trailing Azalea and Alpine Ladies-Mantle are like jewels in these harsh surroundings.

Also you are not far from other rich wildlife areas like the Moray Firth, where Britain's most reliable population of Bottlenose Dolphins are found. Watching from the end of Chanonry Point there are often plenty of people hoping to be entertained by their leaping and chasing, as they hunt Salmon coming into the river. In the winter this coastline comes alive with thousands of Eider, scoters and Long-tailed Duck, with the chance of seeing all three species of diver as well as scarce grebes like Slavonian and Red-necked. In the summer look out for nesting terns with four species here; Common, Arctic, Sandwich and Little, plus there is always the chance of an Osprey fishing in the surf. In Autumn and Spring skuas are passing offshore and flocks of waders gather on the estuaries.



The west coast is also only two hours away with a real chance of seeing White-tailed Sea Eagle! This spectacular bird was reintroduced in the 1970s and 80s and has slowly increased in numbers, so that around 40 pairs are now nesting on the Hebrides and the west coast of the Scottish mainland. Many places have nesting Black Guillemots while there are also some spectacular seabird colonies, where cliff ledges are crowded with noisy Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes, with Puffins often digging their burrows in the turf on top of the sea stacks. This is the best place to come in search of Otter, much easier to see on the coast than on freshwater as their behaviour is more linked to the tides here and they are therefore more likely to be out in daylight. There is also the option of a boat trip to see Minke Whales, who can sometimes be curious enough to come over to the boat to check you out, making you wonder who is watching who! Despite being one of the smaller species of whale, they are still fabulous and when they are feeding there is often a frenzy of bird activity too, with Manx Shearwaters and Storm Petrels likely to be here as well as all the auks and gulls.

It can feel a little daunting knowing where to start in such a vast area and we have all had that feeling of frustration when you just know the wildlife is there somewhere but you can't find it! It can take luck and a lot of patience to see many of these species on your own but you can increase your chances enormously by enlisting the help of someone with unbeatable local knowledge (see links below for further details).

Nowhere else in the UK is there such a wealth and diversity of special wildlife, why not get out there and enjoy it.

Speyside Wildlife

01479 812498

[enquiries@speysidewildlife.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@speysidewildlife.co.uk)

[www.speysidewildlife.co.uk](http://www.speysidewildlife.co.uk)