

**Autumn Birding in Galloway
based at the Selkirk Arms Hotel,
Kirkcudbright
Tuesday 24th – Friday 27th October 2023**

Guide: James Champion



The group minus Suzanne, who took the photo

2023 Kirkcudbright Birdwatching Break

Tuesday 24th October

We assembled at 18.30 on the Tuesday evening in the Burns Room at the Selkirk Arms Hotel in Kirkcudbright for drinks, canapés and a getting-to-know-each-other meeting, after which we went through to the dining room for dinner, retiring to bed afterwards, full not only of delicious food but also of anticipation of the birds we hoped to see the following day!

Wednesday 25th October

We started off from the hotel after a delicious breakfast, and made our first stop on the east side of the bay just south of Kirkcudbright, with absolutely flat calm conditions and a very high tide. The viewing was ideal, and it was not long before we spotted initially one and then a further two Red-throated Divers out in the bay, offering fine views.



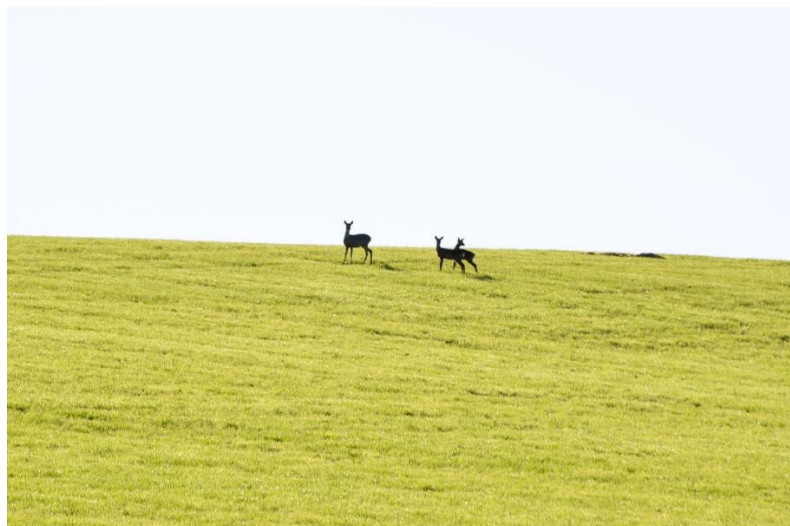
The bay was idyllic, with a Red-throated Diver just offshore

Other birds here were several Dunlins and Curlews, but the high water meant there was little space for wading birds, although a number of Little Egrets were dotted along the far coast, and several Wigeon were feeding along the near shore. Land birds seen here included Wren, Greenfinch and several Pheasants, some dead and some alive. A Red Kite was spotted circling over a distant wood.

Our next stop, after passing through the small village of Dundrennan with its splendid ruined abbey, was a gateway leading into the field that holds the well-known Wickerman figure, made as one would expect of wickerwork. While admiring and photographing this extraordinary structure from the gate, a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew in and landed on the hip of the figure! This prompted us to rename the bird the Great Spotted Wickerpecker!



Also seen here was a group of three Roe Deer running along the hillside opposite, and several more Red Kites in flight.





This Red Kite put on a fine flypast

From here, we drove to the RSPB's Mersehead reserve, where we first went into the viewing room, from where we were treated to excellent views of Tree and House Sparrows, Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Robins and Dunnocks on and below the feeders, as well as two Coal Tits. Out on the marsh beyond the pools a large flock of Barnacle and Canada Geese could be seen foraging in the grass, and a number of Starlings were also seen, looking surprisingly striking at such close quarters.



Tree Sparrows are always a welcome sight these days



We then walked to both the Bruaich and the Meida hides, from where we had views of a number of duck species including Pintail, Shoveler and Teal, as well as Wigeon and Mallard. The walk also produced a very attractive Grey Wagtail and a Pied Wagtail on the one of the metal barn roofs, as well as large numbers of Redwings and Blackbirds in the hawthorns. A small party of Goldcrests showed well in the woodland, and a few Lapwings were seen in the fields.





Our next stop was the old lighthouse at Southernness Point, from where we could see hundreds, if not thousands of Oystercatchers and numerous Curlews and Redshanks, but as the tide was a long way out, the birds were quite distant.



Southernness lighthouse, commissioned in 1748 and improved under the guidance of Robert Stevenson in 1805

The same was true at Carsethorn, where we saw similar species, with a very pleasant addition of a considerable number of Knot, which were tightly bunched in a flock as is so often the case with this species.

Our final destination was Carlingwark Loch, in the centre of Castle Douglas, where the evening sunlight was beautiful but a little troublesome as it made viewing rather difficult. Nevertheless, we added Coot, Moorhen, Little Grebe and Goosander to our list, as well as Bullfinch and Nuthatch in the trees. A Kingfisher was heard calling, but it was obscured by bushes and could not be seen.

We then returned to the hotel in time to enjoy some very fine canapés and an excellent dinner, after which James gave his India talk, which had to be cut short as some people were getting very sleepy after a long but thoroughly enjoyable first day!

Thursday 26th October

Today's weather forecast was not nearly as good as yesterday's, but we set off full of enthusiasm under grey skies towards the west, stopping briefly at Carsluith, where again the tide was extremely high, reducing the possibilities for shorebirds, so we pressed on along the A75, eventually turning south down the Rhinns peninsula. We stopped again to scan the top end of Luce Bay at Sandhead, but the wind here was much stronger than we had anticipated, and it was blowing straight at us, so we quickly moved on to Drummore, where we drove down to the harbour. Again, there was little to be seen offshore other than a few Eiders and Shags, and two Brent Geese flew past us, but on the way back, we spotted a small group of Redshanks and a very pale Greenshank hunkered down on a broken concrete slipway, providing an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast these two closely related species.



Having passed Scotland's southernmost store, we drove on south towards to the Mull of Galloway, past Scotland's southernmost farm and what we assumed must be Scotland's southernmost cow (although later we found that that the whole herd had managed to cross the cattle grid and had ventured further south still!), and parked up in Scotland's southernmost car park, where we were very definitely not alone! We headed straight into the Gallie Craig café, where we enjoyed a well-earned coffee break after the long drive.





Suitably fortified, we ventured out into the wind and then did a round of the lighthouse area, where although there were few birds to be seen, the scenery was spectacular as always here, and an outdoor exhibition of photographs taken at and from the Mull of Galloway was well worth a look. A few Gannets and Shags could be seen offshore, and the Isle of Man was just visible, most of it obscured beneath a large rain cloud.

By now we were feeling somewhat peckish, so we drove a short distance back up the peninsula, and stopped in a pleasant car park with a fine view over the beach at Port Logan, where we enjoyed our picnic lunch. Again birds were few and far between here, although a Little Egret was pecking around the rocks on the jetty across the harbour, and two Dunnocks were chasing each other in the seaside bushes.



From here, we headed back northwards to Stranraer, where James drove us through the town centre to allow for a full appreciation of this fine Royal Burgh, now sadly fallen on hard times. We drove down Broadstone Road, which always offers good birding opportunities, and we were able to add several Red-breasted Mergansers and a single Goldeneye to our list. However, it was at the head of Loch Ryan, along the seafront, that we were really able to appreciate the ornithological delights of this bird-rich inlet. The tide had dropped somewhat, revealing the rich feeding grounds here, and the beach was covered with Brent Geese, Wigeon, Oystercatchers and various species of gull, with at least 100 Scaup feeding just offshore. Some members of the group were particularly delighted to see these attractive sea ducks in such numbers, as there is nowhere else in the UK other than perhaps the Cromarty Firth where such congregations can be seen.



There were large concentrations of birds in Loch Ryan



From here we headed on round the head of the loch on the A77, turning off onto a small roadway that led a few yards down to a viewpoint, where we were treated to excellent looks at four Slavonian Grebes, several Red-throated Divers, and a flock of Eiders in full winter plumage – their calls could be heard across the still water here too.

A short drive further north took us to Cairnryan, the ferry port for Northern Ireland, where we stopped at a layby overlooking the mouth of the sea loch. Here, it was not so much the birds that attracted our attention, but rather a large number of crushed, smashed pumpkins on the ground. Some of the fragments of skin still bore some writing and lists of names, as well as some obscene drawings and insults – we decided this must be a strange Galloway form of pumpkin porn.



“Pumpkin porn”, which we came across in more than one location – a bizarre Galloway tradition?

By now the afternoon was drawing to a close, so we started our journey back to Kirkcudbright, stopping briefly in the Castle Kennedy grounds to admire the beautiful scenery and Lochinsh Castle across the White Loch, where several Great Crested Grebes were to be seen.



The evening was very enjoyable, with even more copious canapés than the night before, and an excellent dinner as always, after which James finished off his India talk, bringing to a close what had been a thoroughly enjoyable and productive birding break in this delightful and relatively undiscovered corner of Scotland. Chris Walker and his team of enthusiastic and professional staff at the Selkirk Arms made our stay a huge pleasure, and our thanks go to them for looking after us so well.

BIRDS:

Red-throated Diver

Great Crested Grebe

Slavonian Grebe

Little Grebe

Gannet

Cormorant

Shag

Little Egret

Grey Heron

Mute Swan

Canada Goose

Barnacle Goose

Brent Goose

Wigeon

Teal

Mallard

Pintail

Shoveler

Tufted Duck

Scaup

Eider

Common Scoter

Goldeneye

Red-breasted Merganser

Goosander

Red Kite

Hen Harrier

Buzzard

Kestrel

Pheasant

Moorhen

Coot

Oystercatcher

Ringed Plover

Lapwing
Knot
Dunlin
Bar-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Redshank
Greenshank
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Guillemot
(Black Guillemot)
Wood Pigeon
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon
Collared Dove
Kingfisher (heard only)
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Pied Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Stonechat
Blackbird
Fieldfare
Redwing
Song Thrush
Goldcrest
Long-tailed Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Nuthatch

Magpie

Jackdaw

Rook

Carrion Crow

Hooded Crow

Raven

Starling

House Sparrow

Tree Sparrow

Chaffinch

Greenfinch

Goldfinch

Bullfinch

MAMMALS:

Rabbit

Roe Deer

