

# **Mammal Report: Speyside and Ardnamurchan Peninsula, Scotland, October 2008.**

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## **Introduction**

On October 12, 2008, I visited the Highlands of Scotland for a week. While wildlife watching wasn't the primary aim of my trip, I was able to spend a reasonable amount of time birding and searching for mammals, mostly accompanied by my understanding but long suffering girlfriend.

The first three nights were spent in Carrbridge, Speyside allowing us to explore the Findhorn Valley, Abernethy Forest and the Moray Firth area. For the remainder of the week we were based at Glenfinnan on the west coast of Scotland giving us access to Ardnamurchan and the Isle of Skye.

While the weather could have been much worse, for the majority of the week we had to endure rain showers, mixed with sunny spells and low cloud. Temperatures were mild for the time of year.

## **Accommodation/Food**

I wouldn't hesitate to recommend Dalrachney Lodge (01479 841252) in Carrbridge for good food and hospitality.

Glenfinnan Hotel (01397 722235) in Glenfinnan were also very accommodating and their bar meals were excellent. Unfortunately, this hotel is situated a little far from the mammal hotspots on the Ardnamurchan Peninsular so I would be reluctant to use them again purely for this reason.

We had a couple of pre-night drive pub meals in Strontian, Ardnamurchan. The Ben View Hotel was far superior to The Strontian, in terms of both service and quality.

## **Mammals**

### **Western Hedgehog** *Erinaceus europaeus*

Oct 18: One individual was seen crossing the road at night near the Natural History Centre on Ardnamurchan. Roadkills were commonplace in Speyside.

### **Common Noctule Bat** *Nyctalus noctula*

Oct 16: A single Noctule was observed flying in broad daylight at 1pm over a cottage garden. Most likely taking advantage of the sunny spell, this bat was noted about half a mile from Ardnamurchan Point.

### **Bat sp.**

A medium sized bat species appeared briefly in my car headlights on the night of Oct 6, approximately a mile from Acharacle, Ardnamurchan. Bat diversity is low on the peninsula, and I would assume the species was a Natterer's (*Myotis nattereri*) going by size.

**European Rabbit** *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Rabbits were numerous on Speyside, especially in lowland fields. Strangely none were seen on the west coast.

**European Brown Hare** *Lepus europaeus*

A single Brown Hare was recorded on Oct 13, just outside Boat of Garten, Speyside.

**Mountain Hare** *Lepus timidus*

One of my targets of the holiday, I was told this species is easy to see at several sites. I was unsuccessful finding them in the Findhorn Valley, probably due to high wind. Mid-afternoon on Oct 13, I scoped several animals from a lay-by off the A939 near Lynemore, Highland.

Incidentally, the Slochd Summit lay-by off the A9 (Grid Ref: NJ066238) is also supposed to be good for Mountain Hare although I didn't have time to check this out.

**Eurasian Red Squirrel** *Sciurus vulgaris*

Red Squirrels are relatively common in Speyside and can often be seen crossing the road or visiting bird tables. On Oct 15 four individuals were seen on a 15 minute walk from the Landmark Centre, Carrbridge. On previous trips to Scotland I have seen good numbers in the Abernethy Forest and at Loch Eilein.

**Eurasian Otter** *Lutra lutra*

The west coast of Scotland is possibly one of the best areas to look for these animals in the wild. However, while we spent a respectable amount of time looking for them, they proved very elusive to say the least.

Only one Otter was observed. This was from the hide at Kylerhea Otter Haven on the Isle of Skye (Oct 17).

With hindsight, I think we spent too much driving around the coast trying to spot Otter from a moving vehicle. Staking out an area, especially on a falling tide, would probably be more productive.

**Pine Marten** *Martes martes*

A Marten crossed the road near Acharacle late on Oct 18 providing an enticing glimpse of this wonderful creature. Baited hides (see below) can offer more prolonged views.

**Wild Cat** *Felis silvestris*

Seeing a Scottish wildcat must rank top of any UK mammal watchers list. The stretch of road between Port na Croisg and the junction with the Kilmory road on Ardnamurchan is reputedly one of the most reliable spots to see them, although it still requires a lot of patience, a considerable amount of effort and a huge amount of luck.

Armed with a spotlight I spent two evenings searching the scree slopes and rush fields. On the second night (Oct 18) I had a probable Wildcat. Unfortunately as the animal was some distance from the road, I was unable to completely rule out Wildcat/domestic hybrid, before it slunk off down a slope and out of view.

To say I was frustrated is a gross understatement, especially as I know several people that have recently seen Wildcat in the exact same area. Needless to say I will be having another go before long.

**Common (Harbour) Seal** *Phoca vitulina*

Common Seals were seen at several locations, including Loch Linnhe and Loch Sunart (Ardnamurchan), Mallaig Harbour and in the Moray Firth (from Chanonry Point).

**Grey Seal** *Halichoerus grypus*

Chanonry Point, Black Isle (Oct 14), was the only place this species was seen.

**Common Bottle-nosed Dolphin** *Tursiops truncatus*

A resident population of Dolphins occur around the Moray and Cromarty Firths, estimated at over 130 animals.

Oct 14: We spent a day exploring the Black Isle and Nairn area, starting at Chanonry Point, before driving to Fort George at the other side of the firth. Unfortunately no Dolphins were seen despite a lengthy seawatch at both locations.

After a long walk at Culbin Sands I made a spur of the moment decision to return back to Fort George where through my scope I could see one Bottle-nosed Dolphin performing to an assembled crowd across the water at Chanonry Point.

**Red Deer** *Cervus elaphus*

Common in Scotland we saw Red Deer every day. The Rut was in full swing during our visit and some impressive stags were noted. The moorland, South of the Natural History Centre on Ardnamurchan, produces very close views both day and night. Findhorn Valley is also good, although the animals are often distant.

**Western Roe Deer** *Capreolus capreolus*

At least seven Roe Deer were observed from the visitor centre at Insh Marshes RSPB, near Kingussie (Oct 15). According to the visitor's log, they are present most days and I saw smaller numbers at this same reserve a couple of years ago.

### **Feral Goat** *Capra hircus*

I'm not sure on the ethics of ticking Feral Goats, although many mammal listers do. A population is well documented in Findhorn Valley, but I have never looked for them.

I did see a couple of scruffy looking goats clinging to the cliff face bordering the A861 on Ardnamurchan (Oct 15).

### **Other Wildlife Highlights**

The star bird of the week was undoubtedly a cracking Male Capercaillie that I came across early morning at Loch Garten. Several Golden Eagles were seen on Ardnamurchan and a Common Lizard was a nice surprise at Culbin Sands. Finally, a dogfight between the Findhorn Peregrine Falcons and Ravens was an amusing and memorable experience.

### **Stuff I missed**

Ardnamurchan is probably one of the best spots for cetacean watching in the UK. Many species are recorded from the lighthouse at the point, including Minke Whale, Killer Whale and Risso's Dolphin. Apparently Harbour Porpoises are frequent in Loch Sunart.

Several boat trips operate from the mainland, as well as the islands of Mull and Skye. Ardnamurchan Charters (01972 500208) were recommended to me by several people, although unfortunately my visit was too late in the season to make such a trip worthwhile.

Other mammals I missed include Mink, which are often seen along the coastline of Scotland. On a previous visit to Fort William, a family had taken up residence under the local seafood restaurant by the harbour.

### **Speyside Mammal Hide**

Anyone visiting Scotland in search of mammals would be well advised to spend an evening at a baited hide such as the one operated by [Speyside Wildlife](#).

In 2006 I enjoyed excellent views of **Badger** and **Pine Marten**, with a supporting cast of **Wood Mice**, **Red Deer** and **Pipistrelle Bats**. Time constraints meant we missed the hide out on our latest visit, although I will be sure to visit again in the future.