



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT SPEYSIDE 10TH – 16TH APRIL 2016

www.oriolebirding.com

oriolebirding@gmail.com

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SUNDAY 10TH APRIL – *Light winds and sunny spells, 11C*

The tour met at 1400 in Dunfermline at our hotel after journeys of varying lengths, from Norfolk to California! We were soon ready to head out for our first birding session, at the nearby RSPB reserve at Loch Leven, Vane Farm. This beautiful spot makes for a great introduction, and the feeding stations around the Visitor Centre are good for seeing a variety of finches. **Eurasian Siskins** looked dazzling in the spring sunshine and a pair of **Brambling** included a fine male coming to one of the bird tables. **Tree Sparrows** are also a bit of a speciality here, and we saw several around the trails down to the hides. Great views of common birds were the order of the day, as the light was superb – Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, **Goosander**, **Common Goldeneye**, Grey Heron, Skylark and Northern Lapwing were all right by the hides – the latter looking particularly superb in the afternoon sun. A pair of Great Crested Grebes were indulging in their courtship display, and we watched them right through to the presentation of the weed! A couple of small flocks of **Pink-footed Geese** dropped in, and other species noted included Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, Eurasian Curlew and a single **Little Egret**. Walking through the woodland, Common Chiffchaff was seen and a pair of Bullfinch showed really well. On St Serf's Island, thirty **Goosander**, a small party of **Barnacle Geese** and hundreds of Lesser Black-backed Gulls were added, plus two **Sand Martins** hawking over the loch. A very pleasant afternoon, but with long days all round, we were glad for an early dinner back at the restaurant and an early night – we had some really early starts yet to come!



Northern Lapwing and Bullfinch, 10th April

MONDAY 11TH APRIL – *Moderate NE winds, overcast 7C*

We set out from Dunfermline this morning and headed east along the Fife coast to Largo Bay, a well known place for observing seaduck and a super all round birding spot. We made for Ruddon's Point at the east end, noting Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer around the parking spot and numerous Skylarks and Meadow Pipits. Once on the point, we viewed the intertidal area out to the shore and began seeing many seaduck – Common Eider were present in large numbers, and we picked out a single **Velvet Scoter** close inshore. Several Northern Gannets were breezing by, no doubt from the nearby Bass Rock colony, and we also saw two Northern Fulmars passing offshore. Other birds on the water from this first watchpoint included European Shags, a Razorbill and a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers. Five **Sandwich Terns** fishing in the surf were a nice bonus, and a reminder that Spring is progressing even this far north! Wandering a bit further around the point and walking onto

the beach, we found many Common Eider were sheltering just beyond the rocks and two parties of Common Scoter were also seen. About eight Velvet Scoter were nice and close in, mainly drakes, and giving some really superb views too. Scanning through the eider, we received a bit of a shock as we dropped onto a female **King Eider**, right there in front of us close inshore! We hadn't actually checked back through the reports more than a couple of days prior, and didn't realise there had been one here for most of the year. Still, despite not having found it ourselves, it was a smashing bird to see! A bit further along the shore we found a Whimbrel feeding, another super group of Red-breasted Mergansers, two more Razorbills and more Common Scoters, plus a brace of Atlantic Puffins bobbing in the swell – not a bad mornings haul!



Female King Eider [bottom] with Common Eider, 11th April

We then began our journey north, stopping for lunch along the way, and soon reached the Spey Valley at Kingussie where we exited the A9 and took the road past Ruthven Barracks to Insh Marshes RSPB. From the viewing platform, a couple of small groups of **Whooper Swans** could be seen, the odd Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal and Grey Heron, plus a very, very distant displaying **Golden Eagle** over the Monadhliath Mountains opposite – we often seem to pick them up from here, looking back over Kingsussie and over the ridge beyond. In nearby fields, we super views of a mixed flock of Redwing and Fieldfare in pasture, before following the Spey along towards Aviemore. Our last stop gave us cracking views of a pair of **Goosander**, a couple of Common Goldeneye and a few **Sand Martins**, plus a super pair of **Ospreys** on their nest. The female was carrying out some running repairs, before being joined by the male. Mating was observed, and the female continued to call as the male took flight and headed off again. A great spectacle to end the day! We reached Carrbridge and our accommodation about 1745, and were typically well fed by our hosts Christine and Michael!

TUESDAY 12TH APRIL – Moderate NE winds, cloudy, 11C

We headed towards the Cairngorms this morning, but were slightly downhearted to see the tops shrouded in heavy cloud. Nevertheless we decided to continue up as the forecast for the week was for continued cloud and in the mountains, it could easily get worse rather than better! At the bottom car park, a cracking male **Ring Ouzel** was singing from the wires of the old ski lift and then came down in front of us to feed on the turf at the edge of the car park. It was a real treat to see one so well and such prolonged views too. A couple of **Red Grouse** were calling and a male was perched on a rock in the open, looking rather splendid against the heather. Joining the throng of skiers at the mountain railway station, we crammed onto the first train of the day and were soon zooming towards the top station and restaurant. Again, on arrival, the Ptarmigan Restaurant was completely enveloped in cloud and we could see nothing at all from the viewing platform. This was really disappointing, but we decided that we may as well have a coffee in the restaurant and give it half an hour to see what materialised. This was a good move, as a brief bright spell of weather came through and all of a sudden we could see down across the snow covered scree slopes, which were momentarily bathed in sun! Immediately, we picked out two **Rock Ptarmigan** feeding on the slope beyond the ski tow, and from the warmth of the restaurant we had great scope views – in the end we had half the restaurant queueing to view the birds! We nipped back out into the -9C windchill and actually got some clearer views without looking through the glass, and it was great to see them scuttling across the snow and sheltering down by the leeward side of the rocks. The visibility cleared right up, and we could see across Loch Morlich to Aviemore and beyond to the distant mountains – spectacular! Of course there were no other birds to see at this altitude so we took the train back down, feeling decidedly warm in the sunshine at Coire Cas car park.



Ring Ouzel, Cairngorm 12th April

Next we planned a change of scenery and headed down into the forests around Loch Morlich to search for **Crested Tits**. At one of our favoured spots, we heard a **Crested Tit** calling before we had even walked 100m from the car park, and we found it feeding in a dead, lichen covered pine right by the path with a couple of Coal Tits. Along the walk, we quickly bumped into another Crestie feeding in young conifers by the side of the track and further on, a third was calling and seen beautifully

perched right in the top of a Scots Pine. The last one was seen through the scope too – we certainly had the chance to fill our boots on this species today! A single **Crossbill** flew over calling, but we couldn't assign it to species. Lunching on a picnic bench in the sun back at the car park, it was a far cry from the cold and windswept mountain a few hours earlier!



Crested Tit, 12th April Glen More

For the rest of the afternoon, we took a drive north up the A9 and along Strathdearn, also known as the Findhorn Valley. This beautiful glen is a truly stunning place to go birding and is well known for its raptors, especially Golden Eagle. We picked up a few bits along the way down, the best being a pair of **Dippers** where a small stream fed into the Findhorn River. At our chosen watchpoint, we spent about 1.5hrs scanning the hillsides and ridge tops for birds of prey – several Common Buzzards, Common Kestrel and some great views of **Peregrine** were had, while a brief view of what was probably a **Merlin** dashing along the hill, was not quite enough to confirm its ID. A couple of sightings of **Common Raven**, several **Red Deer** and three fantastic **Mountain Hares** still in white winter coat made for a very enjoyable watch. A **Golden Eagle** did appear very briefly, circling once above the ridge, but it did not want to play ball and quickly dropped behind the hill. A couple of Wild Goats were also seen up on the mountainside, and a big flock of Eurasian Curlew were in the valley bottom. We returned to base around 1830, actually feeling ready for one of Mike's enormous dinners!

WEDNESDAY 13TH APRIL – Moderate NE winds, showers 9C

Our longest travelling day today saw us heading north to Inverness and across the Black Isle before continuing west on the road out to Ullapool. We saw a couple of **Red Kites** along the way, and a **Grey Wagtail** was also seen at a brief roadside stop to stretch the legs. Heading up to Dundonnell, our first proper birding stop was by Little Loch Broom, overlooking the tidal merse at the head of the

sealoch. Waders were plentiful here, and we saw two superb spotty breeding plumaged **Common Greenshanks**, a couple of **Common Ringed Plovers**, **Common Redshanks** and **Eurasian Curlews**. **Red-breasted Merganser** and **Common Eider** were on the loch itself, but scanning of all the adjacent ridges failed to produce any eagles. The scenery along this route is simply stunning – the snow-capped peaks of **Ben Wyvis** and the **Ben Eigghe** range surrounded us and the views north towards **Ullapool** and **Sutherland** were just breathtaking. Dropping down to **Gruinard Bay**, our second stop was overlooking **Gruinard Island**, a superb spot for looking for divers. We straight away picked up a full breeding plumaged **Great Northern Diver**, with a further half dozen non-breeders also seen dotted around. A second full-plumaged bird popped up right in front of us, just beyond the rocks, and began to preen – a very beautiful bird indeed. In the same spot, a **Slavonian Grebe** was fishing, looking equally stunning, and a nice bonus since we had not yet had chance to visit any of the breeding lochans to see them. Distant **Black Guillemot** and **Great Skua** were also seen from this point, and a couple of **Red-breasted Mergansers**, with three **European Golden Plover** in the distant fields too – a fourth which flew by calling showed a beautiful black belly. The best birds seen from this point were a pair of stunning **Black-throated Divers** in full breeding attire – we watched them for some time preening on the water in a sheltered part of the bay, and marvelled at their plumage which with the sun now out, really did look something special. Always a treat to see and close views to boot – a good morning!



Black-throated Divers and Slavonian Grebe, Gruinard Bay 13th April

We continued around the far side of the bay and made a further stop to scan the water. There were many **European Shags** on the sea here, and a **Rock Dove** flew by, but it was otherwise fairly quiet. Two **Common Raven** showed well though, cronking and tumbling along the cliffs below and cruising right past at eye level. We were just about to pack up and move on, when we spotted two pairs of **Red-throated Divers** out on the choppy water. They were squabbling with each other, and soon one of the pairs began to display, stretching their necks out in front low to the water in perfect synchronisation and dashing forward, before turning in unison and dashing back the other way – quite a sight! The second pair chased them and there was much flapping and diving going on before one of the pairs flew a short distance further out. None of us had ever seen this behaviour before, and while perhaps not the gaudiest of the three species of diver they really make up for it with a great display! Turning to pack our scopes into the van, a **White-tailed Eagle** appeared over the distant

hills and drifted across, mobbed by a Hooded Crow – we would have missed it if not for the divers distracting us!



Great Northern Diver and Red-breasted Merganser, Gruinard Bay 13th April

Mellon Udrigle is always our favoured lunch spot along this coast and we arrived there to find several smashing **Northern Wheatears** singing and displaying around the car park, and a smart Redwing feeding among them in one of the paddocks. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk drifted over, and after lunch we wandered to the beach where two more Red-throated Divers and a fine drake Red-breasted Merganser were seen. The highlight though was an immature **White-tailed Eagle** which came right across the beach over our heads and off over the ridge behind, where it was mobbed by a Peregrine! Great views and a bit of a shock to see the beast lumbering over the top of us like that – we had been scanning the distant hills looking for black dots! Back at the car park, a wheezy call alerted us to the presence of **Twite** and sure enough four birds flew in and landed on a fence by the edge of a croft, where we were able to scope them. The pink rump was clearly visible as a pair attempted mating on a barbed wire! This species is thinly distributed along this coastline and it always requires a bit of luck to find them, so this was particularly pleasing. More **Rock Doves** were seen on the way out, when we also paused a couple of times to take some photos of the amazing scenery looking east. A quick final stop for coffee on the way back gave us a super male **Merlin**, which whizzed in across a cliff face before spiralling up and over the top – it didn't linger, but a great bird to connect with all the same.

The long drive back to Carrbridge was made mainly through rain, and we were grateful that we had conducted all of our birding in the dry today out on the west coast – the rain seemed to be hugging the Cairngorms instead. Back in the village, we just about had time for one more look at a spot where **Black Grouse** can sometimes be seen. Driving slowly, we found a splendid Blackcock sitting underneath a pine tree right by the side of the road! We watched him preening, fanning his tail and flashing his wonderful blue sheened plumage, at point blank range next to our van. Two more males were close by, and we were able to watch them feeding in the heather by staying in the van and pulling alongside. Definitely a top bird to end the day – though we also found a flock of twenty **European Golden Plover** in breeding plumage which wowed us with their smart black bellies, running around in a field right by the roadside – it had been a very good day!

THURSDAY 14TH APRIL – *Light northerly winds and sunny spells, 13C*

We rose early this morning, for a try at seeing the elusive **Capercaillie** in Abernethy Forest. These shy birds are in their display period at this time of year, and the RSPB Loch Garten Osprey Centre run their daily 'Caper Watch' sessions to try and facilitate safe and responsible viewing of this shy bird. We went along at 0530, and unlike in past years [probably due to the fact the birds have become less reliable] there were not many people present, which certainly made it easier to find a space in the hide where you could actually see out of a window! About thirty minutes in, we picked up a male **Capercaillie**, far in the back behind a small conifer, sitting well concealed among the heather. He began displaying though, and we managed to get three or four scopes trained on the right spot. With patience, he began to emerge from behind the tree and we could see his head and neck down to his white epaulettes as he threw back his head and began to display. Occasional glimpses of his tail were possible through the branches, and on two occasions he also 'flutter-jumped' up from the heather to advertise his wares to any watching females. Thankfully everyone had great views despite the distance involved, and we went away just after 0700 feeling very happy indeed! Of course, the **Ospreys** were on the nest tree from the hide and a single **Crossbill** flew over the car park calling as we left. We had a quick check on the way back of the spot where we saw the **Black Grouse** yesterday, but someone was walking dogs across the field and there were no birds present. Breakfast beckoned!



Capercaillie, Loch Garten 14th April

The remainder of our day would be filled with birding along the Moray Coast, and we travelled north as usual across the moorland via Lochindorb. We had some super close up views of **Red Grouse** on the moorland road, and one the loch three **Red-throated Divers** showed well, eventually taking to the air and flying round the loch with slow wing beats in a display flight. A **Common Greenshank** was on the shoreline, and a **Red Squirrel** was seen in the edge of the wood, trying to remember where it had buried its stash! Findhorn Bay was our next stop, and despite the tide being well out we saw many birds on the estuary here. A **Yellowhammer** was around the parking spot by the hide, and from the edge of the merse here we saw a spectacular flock of **European Golden Plovers**, all in summer plumage! In front of them were mixed feeding flocks of **Red Knot**, **Dunlin**, **Common Redshank** and **Common Ringed Plover**, but we had better views of all of these further towards the river mouth. Here

we also found two Bar-tailed Godwits, a flock of Northern Pintail, and had great views of displaying Common Goldeneye and Red-breasted Mergansers. Two Sandwich Terns were perched on a bouy in the channel, and the Knot flock settled on a sand bar right in front of us. The sun was out by the time we reached the dunes here, and scanned Burghead Bay from the beach. With the onshore wind, there was quite a swell, but we saw several nice **Long-tailed Ducks**, a few **Velvet Scoter**, Common Eider, Razorbill and a single **Slavonian Grebe**. A mixed party of Common and Grey Seals were hauled out on the beach here too. We ended our exploration of the Findhorn Bay area with a quick drive along the southern side of the estuary, where around 1500 **Pink-footed Geese** were grazing on the merse and made for a great sight and sound in the sunshine.

Burghead is often a grey and unforgiving place but it was bathed in spring sunshine today! From the maltings, we enjoyed lunch while scoping passing **Black-legged Kittiwakes**, Northern Gannet and large rafts of Razorbill. We managed to pick out a couple of Common Guillemot, and saw further **Red-throated** and **Great Northern Divers** too. Walking up to the point, the sea was covered in birds – auks were actually the main group with many scores more Razorbill, plus a few **Long-tailed Duck**, Common Eider and two close **Red-throated Divers**. A flock of **Pink-footed Geese** flew right overhead calling, and headed out over the Moray Firth, no doubt starting their journey to Iceland. Two **Harbour Porpoise** moved offshore, and a **Rock Pipit** was added to the list on the walk back to the van.

We continued east to the town of Lossiemouth, which while only just up the road from Burghead, always appears infinitely better presented and more affluent! We scanned the tidal channel near the beach and a cracking drake **Goosander** was floating there with a few Eurasian Wigeon, and many large gulls were bathing in the fresh water. We could only see the common species amongst them though, so carried on to nearby Loch Spynie, a spot we had not visited before. Several **Yellowhammers** were seen on the approach, and five **Whooper Swans** were in the roadside fields. The loch is a super place, with a well positioned hide, and we saw some nice birds there. A **Red Squirrel** was on the feeders for starters, and the water was peppered with displaying **Common Goldeneye**, **Little Grebe**, **Tufted Duck**, **Common Teal** and a fine adult drake **Greater Scaup**. Several **Sand Martins** were over the water and two **Barn Swallows** were among them, while another **Yellowhammer** visited the feeders. Several large skeins of **Pink-footed Geese** rounded off the day here, before we embarked on the hour long journey back to Carrbridge. The Cairngorms looked spectacular in the evening sun as we came down off the moor at Lochindorb, having been dusted with fresh snow during the day.

FRIDAY 15TH APRIL – *Snow, cold with sunny spells later, 3C*

It was forecast that we would wake up to heavy snow this morning and in fact it did not materialise – it was snowing but with wet ground it was not settling, though it did feel rather chilly to be out! We started locally with a walk down to the famous bridge over the Dulnain River in Carrbridge and we walked west upstream to look for Dipper. **Grey Wagtails** was seen well and many common birds were out and about in the snow – **Goldcrest**, **Coal Tit**, **Song Thrush** and **Eurasian Siskin**. Two **Common Sandpipers** were by the footbridge, our first of the trip, and then we got a surprise as a stonking male **Ring Ouzel** flew up from one of the paddocks and perched on a telegraph pole right in front of us! It soon vanished, and we didn't see it again – obviously a migrant casualty of the overnight weather.

Abernethy Forest would be our destination for much of the rest of the day, and we started with the circular walk down to Loch Mallachie. There was no-one else around, the forest was silent and the snow was falling heavily – it really was beautiful. Gradually, as we walked quietly on, a few calls started to appear, principally of **Crossbills** overhead – our target bird. Two dropped in to the top of a pine and we got quick scope views but then they were gone, and without longer looks and pictures it was not possible to assign them to one of the trio of possibilities! The same thing happened again a little further on – everyone had now seen a **Crossbill** in the scope but we still were not closer to an ID. Down at Loch Mallachie, **Common Goldeneye** and **Common Teal** were on the still water and the

snow-dusted hills behind made for a stunning backdrop. Then more Crossbill calls, and we were off again in pursuit. This time we got some longer views of a male high in the trees, an obscured by branches, but it was probably a **Common Crossbill**. The snow really came down now, so we hastened back along the trail to the van for a coffee to warm up.



Common Crossbills, Abernethy 15th April

We headed deeper into Abernethy and after a slow drive down the track into the heart of the forest, we had lunch during the heaviest snow fall of the morning so far. It soon cleared to blue sky and sunshine though, and we set off eagerly along the track in search of more Crossbills. Not far along, we heard **Crested Tit** calling and two were roving among the pines by the side of the track with **Coal Tits**. We got some more excellent views of them – it had really been a good trip for the species this year. As we were watching the tits, a crossbill flew out from behind the branch we were looking at, carrying a cone! Two birds were in fact present, and both were **Common Crossbills**, and they showed brilliantly in perfect light, on and off for about twenty minutes. Occasionally they would break a whole cone off and carry it deep inside the pine to feed, before returning to the fringed of the tree for another. A deep ‘chup-chup’ call was then heard and two more flew in – but large billed birds this time! Frustratingly they always remained at the back of the tree and we couldn’t get clear views of pictures, and then they flew off again. We had another perched view of the male, and it certainly did look large billed, but again they flew off and we didn’t have any pictures. We then located what we presumed was a different male, feeding just above us, and with clear views could see it was in fact a **Parrot Crossbill**, out in the open at point blank range! What a brute of a bird!



Parrot Crossbill, Abernethy 15th April

This time we did get some shots, and were well convinced by the identification – it flew off giving a lovely deep call, too. Most of the time, the **Crested Tits** kept popping back into view, but had taken a back seat with all the Crossbill action going on! With another snow-storm looming on the horizon, we hastened back to the car park feeling pretty happy with the afternoons work.

We still had time for a bit more birding before heading back to Carrbridge, so we headed up a nearby valley to look for raptors as the sun was now out again! Three male **Black Grouse** were feeding out in a distant field, and we were able to watch them a while through the scope. It was really cold now though in the raw north wind, so we didn't want to hang around in one place too long. We moved back along the valley a bit, where we had a great vista all around over the snow clad mountains, and soon our quarry loomed into view – a subadult **Golden Eagle**. We had only managed distant or brief views so far, and so we were very happy indeed with what unfolded. The first bird drifted away, only to be followed by an adult pair which began displaying over the mountain top, diving down in dramatic swoops high in the clouds. Amazingly, a fourth individual then came in and began tussling with the pair, before it too broke away and began displaying itself! We followed this bird for some time until it went into hunting mode, hanging high above the ridge. Some really good prolonged views, and all surrounded by just draw-dropping mountain scenery. Our route back took us over the River Spey near Nethybridge, and a **Common Sandpiper** and two lovely close **Goosander** were the final birds of yet another exhilarating day birding the Scottish Highlands.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Red-throated Diver
2. Black-throated Diver
3. Great Northern Diver
4. Little Grebe
5. Great Crested Grebe
6. Slavonian Grebe
7. Northern Fulmar
8. Great Cormorant
9. European Shag
10. Northern Gannet
11. Grey Heron
12. Little Egret
13. Mute Swan
14. Whooper Swan
15. Greylag Goose
16. Canada Goose
17. Pink-footed Goose
18. Barnacle Goose
19. Common Shelduck
20. Mallard
21. Common Teal
22. Eurasian Wigeon
23. Gadwall
24. Northern Shoveler
25. Northern Pintail
26. Common Scoter
27. Velvet Scoter
28. Common Eider
29. King Eider
30. Long-tailed Duck
31. Red-breasted Merganser
32. Goosander
33. Common Goldeneye

34. Greater Scaup
35. Tufted Duck
36. Common Pheasant
37. Red-legged Partridge
38. Red Grouse
39. Black Grouse
40. Capercaillie
41. Rock Ptarmigan
42. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
43. Common Kestrel
44. Peregrine
45. Merlin
46. Common Buzzard
47. Red Kite
48. Osprey
49. Golden Eagle
50. White-tailed Eagle
51. Common Moorhen
52. Common Coot
53. European Oystercatcher
54. Common Ringed Plover
55. European Golden Plover
56. Northern Lapwing
57. Common Redshank
58. Common Greenshank
59. Eurasian Curlew
60. Whimbrel
61. Common Snipe [H]
62. Bar-tailed Godwit
63. Dunlin
64. Red Knot
65. Common Sandpiper
66. Black-headed Gull
67. Common Gull
68. Herring Gull
69. Lesser Black-backed Gull
70. Great Black-backed Gull
71. Black-legged Kittiwake
72. Sandwich Tern
73. Great Skua
74. Razorbill
75. Common Guillemot
76. Black Guillemot
77. Atlantic Puffin
78. Great-spotted Woodpecker [H]
79. Woodpigeon
80. Collared Dove
81. Rock Dove
82. Stock Dove
83. Skylark
84. Meadow Pipit
85. Rock Pipit
86. Pied Wagtail
87. Grey Wagtail
88. Barn Swallow

89. Sand Martin
90. Wren
91. Dipper
92. European Robin
93. Dunnock
94. Northern Wheatear
95. Common Blackbird
96. Song Thrush
97. Mistle Thrush
98. Redwing
99. Fieldfare
100. Ring Ouzel
101. Common Chiffchaff
102. Goldcrest
103. Blue Tit
104. Great Tit
105. Coal Tit
106. Long-tailed Tit
107. Crested Tit
108. Common Treecreeper
109. Rook
110. Carrion Crow
111. Hooded Crow
112. Common Raven
113. Western Jackdaw
114. Magpie
115. Common Starling
116. House Sparrow
117. Tree Sparrow
118. Chaffinch
119. Brambling
120. Greenfinch
121. Goldfinch
122. Common Linnet
123. Twite
124. Bullfinch
125. Eurasian Siskin
126. Common Crossbill
127. Parrot Crossbill
128. Reed Bunting
129. Yellowhammer

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