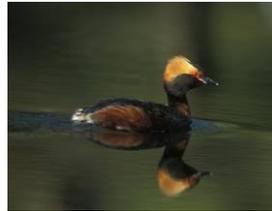


Only the capercaillie (the horse of the woods) and the ptarmigan derive their common names from the Gaelic. A turkey-sized bird, it was extinct in Britain by the late 1700s but was re-introduced using Swedish birds in the 1830s. Its numbers peaked at 20,000 in 1970 but there are now well under 2,000 (1,285 in 2009-10). Speyside has 85% of the National Park population, which is in turn 90% of the UK population. Recent DNA research has suggested that it never actually died out in the UK. There are now just over 1,000 birds. It lives in ancient forest and does not like cold, wet springs. It is a prey animal. The adult male defends a 1km² territory and the lek site is at the junction of the territories of the males. A lot of habitat improvement has been carried out in the National Park for capercaillies. The Loch Garten Osprey Centre in the Abernethy national nature reserve has a capercaillie lek.



Crested tit



Slavonian grebe



Capercaillie



Scottish crossbill

The Scottish crossbill, Common crossbill and Parrot crossbill present a conundrum in that they are reproductively isolated but very difficult to separate. The only definitive way is to use sonogram analysis. The Scottish crossbill is Britain's only endemic bird.

The Osprey was extinct in Scotland from 1916 to 1954, when the first pair were seen at Loch Garten. In 1976, there were only 14 pairs, in 1991 71 pairs but by 2001, there were 158 pairs and it was breeding in England and Wales too.

It is easier to see black grouse, a forest bird, and Red grouse, a bird of the open hills, in Speyside than across the rest of their range. The willow grouse turns white in the UK so it may be a separate species. Black grouse have communal leks and their only territory is that little bit of dance ground (a few m²). The grouse are preyed upon by golden eagles, which tend to be cliff-nesting birds, usually on north- to north-east-facing cliffs and above water, though they also nest in trees in the National Park. On the Glen Tanner Estate, very expensive visits can be made in June/July to a hide to photograph eagles on their nest. Other food is the ptarmigan, which lives above 2,000 feet all year round.

The entire breeding population of dotterel is in the Cairngorms National Park. This bird has sexual role reversal in that the female leks, not the male and the males do all the incubating and rearing. There is a very small total of snow bunting on the high tops.

Mammals include roe deer and red squirrels and, on the Rothiemurchus Estate, there is a hide for evening mammal watching where badgers and pine martens can be seen. In the 1890s, pine martens bred within the city boundary of London. They find grey squirrels easier to catch than red squirrels.



Badgers



Pine martens



Red deer

The Scottish wildcat is the same species as the domestic cat but there are morphological differences. All domestic cats have a dorsal stripe that continues into the tail, while in the wildcat it stops at the base of the tail.

Speyside has a wealth of wildlife and wild flowers. Almost all occurrences of twinflower are in the Cairngorms National Park and there are various species of wintergreen, bog asphodel, various orchids (butterfly, northern marsh, creeping ladies' tresses) and various alpines, sow thistle and pennywort.

Butterflies include the northern brown argus and the Scottish argus and dragonflies and damselflies include the northern damselfly, black darter, white-faced darter, 3 species of emeralds and the azure hawk.

Other birds include the raven, dipper, ring ousel, peregrine falcon, common sandpiper, kittiwake and whimbrel, while mammals include the red deer, famous for its autumn rut, the mountain hare, the only hare native to Britain, which turns white in winter (governed by daylight length) and is the favourite prey of golden eagles and mountain goats, some of which have been feral since the Bronze Age.



Shannery Point

Finally, the speaker turned to the Moray coast and the Black Isle, just north of Inverness, which is important for waders, ducks and geese. An area of rich, flat farmland can have up to 30,000 pink-footed geese in 2 fields as well as wigeon, whooper swans, teal, scoters, eiders, long-tailed ducks from Iceland and purple sandpiper. Shannery Point is a spit from which can be seen the resident bottlenose dolphins.