

Trip Report – Lochaline, Scotland, UK – September 2025

Andy's scuba diving club organised a 5 day trip diving the wrecks in the sound of Mull while staying in Lochaline on the west coast of the Morvern peninsula. This is the peninsula immediately to the south of the Ardnamurchan peninsula, which has a reputation of being very good for mammal watching. Since I've been toying with the idea of going to the Ardnamurchan for many years, and I've never seen pine martens in the wild, and only had a very brief and unsatisfactory sighting of an otter, I decided to tag along, and we extended the trip by doing a wildlife-focused week before Andy's diving started. I would then work remotely from the accommodation during the week of Andy's diving during the day, and cook dinner for our group of divers in the evening. I started researching where to stay in Lochaline and quickly found the Lochaline Hotel, which is run by the same people who run Wild West Coast, who organise single-day and multi-day wildlife and photography tours in the Lochaline and Mull area. I gave them a call and discovered that the area is extremely rich in wildlife. So we decided to spend all the extra time in Lochaline. The plan would be to drive up to Scotland (12 hours of driving for us each way), breaking up the journey into multiple days with stops on the way. Our main targets were:

- Otters
- Pine Martens
- Red Squirrels
- Red Deer
- White-tailed Eagle
- Golden Eagle
- An outside chance of Scottish Wildcat

We left home in South-west London in the late afternoon on a Friday and drove as far as Ellesmere (north of Shrewsbury) where we spent the night with Andy's family. We then carried on the next day to Ullswater in the Lake district. We did two walks, both very scenic and fairly easy. They both had the chance of red squirrels, but since we were there in the middle of the day, we didn't see them. The first walk was around Ullswater, from a little village called Patterdale <https://www.komoot.com/tour/2544528143> and the second was a walk around Aira Force waterfall

https://www.komoot.com/tour/2599847114?share_token=a1Eg68ZVm46RtD8GmTY7W82Oicziesg9K6jgxZoJJkno01MB2&ref=wtd



We spent the night in Carlisle and then headed up to Lochaline the next day. We stopped in Glasgow on the way to stock up on food for the next week and charge the car. The rain started just after we left Carlisle, and it rained for most of the day. As we headed North the roads gradually went from 3 and 4 lane Motorway, down to Dual Carriageway, and then eventually to one lane with regular passing places for when you meet oncoming vehicles. We eventually arrived in Lochaline and headed to the Lochaline Hotel. We were staying for 6 nights in their Glamping Dome. The dome was incredibly comfortable – it was warm, with a nice ensuite bathroom, really comfortable bed

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plus a small kitchenette with a mini fridge, 2-burner plug-in electric hob and a combi ninja that can do oven/air frying/slow cooking/steaming plus a sink and boiling water tap. I was able to cook quite happily for us – I mainly did salads for lunch and slow-cooked meals for dinner that I could prep in the morning and would be ready for when we got back at the end of the day. We chose the dome because we had been told that pine martens come onto the deck at night and we were really hoping to see one. However, no pine martens arrived while we were there, despite leaving peanuts out on the deck every night. All we got were what I think were European Wood Mice and Domestic cats at night, and a lot of Chaffinches during the day. However, even if the Pine Martens had showed up, it would have been virtually impossible to get any photos of them through the clear plastic wall of the dome, and apparently they run away as soon as you step outside. Another option for where to stay would be the self-catering cottages of the Ardtornish Estate – apparently there are also pine martens here too, and also wildcats. However, staying at the Lochaline Hotel meant we were able to ask Peter about the best places to go for wildlife, and the Dome was very comfortable and suited us very well, so I would have no hesitation in recommending this as an option.



Lochaline is a small village – we chose to self cater. There is one posh restaurant (£65 per person for a three course fine dining menu. We went once, it was decent, but in my view nothing special). There is a social club which does basic meals 4 or 5 nights a week, a takeaway van that does burgers for lunch plus fish and chips on Friday if you order ahead. The Lochaline hotel also does meals for guests only. There is also a convenience store that is fairly well stocked (although the selection of meat is very limited). There is a serve yourself community petrol pump and a charging point for electric vehicles. And that is it. You can also buy frozen meat and ready meals from the farm shop on the Ardtornish estate. We had some lamb and also some venison. The diced stewing venison was amazing and also very good value.

For our first full day of wildlife watching we headed out to the Ardtornish Estate. We had originally planned to do a morning trip with Peter, but he double-booked himself, so we rescheduled to Thursday. We started by looking for red squirrels at a place that Peter goes to photograph them. We had hazelnuts with us to entice them in. However, there were no red squirrels (it turned out afterwards that we weren't in quite the right spot). After waiting for a while we drove around the loch and then carried on walking round to the castle. We were looking for otters, but didn't see any. Most of the walk was too far from the lake to be able to have a good view. However – the sun was shining and it wasn't raining, so it was nice to be outside. In the afternoon we did a boat trip looking for **White-tailed Eagles**. <https://wildwestcoast.co.uk/> This was extremely successful. We had fabulous views of 4 different eagles, as well as an assortment of gulls and other shore birds. There were also a few groups of resting **Atlantic Common Seals**.



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Our original plan for the next day was to do a boat trip with <https://sealifemull.co.uk/> looking for cetaceans, seals, basking sharks and sea birds, however, it was cancelled because of poor weather. So we got the 7am ferry across to Mull and got some advice from Peter on where to go. We went looking for short-eared owls to start with, but didn't manage to find any, although we aren't really birders, so this might have been our general incompetence. We carried on and found some raptors, which we were completely convinced at the time were Golden Eagles – they were talon grappling and in the lighting they looked really dark. However, when we got the photos off the camera it became apparent that they were, in fact, **Common Buzzards**. We carried on to more potential owl sites but again, drew a blank. However, we did find another White-tailed Eagle. We returned back to the first owl site, where Andy almost trod on a **Bank Vole** hiding in the grass. It was persuaded to come out slightly with some dried fruit, nut and seed mix that I had in my pocket as a snack. We carried on back towards Loch Beg and Loch Scridain to look for otters. By this stage the weather was distinctly inclement with regular bouts of heavy rain. We had our picnic lunch in the car while we waited for the rain to stop and the tide to start falling. We already knew from Peter that the best time for otters is the 2 hours either side of low tide. We drove slowly along the shore of the lochs, looking carefully for otters and stopping and scanning frequently with binoculars. At first there was nothing except for a group of **Red Deer** grazing by the side of the road. Then in the early afternoon we hit the jackpot and I found the first **Eurasian Otters** of the trip. There were four of them in total, and we spent around two hours watching them. To start with they were on the shore, then they swam over to a nearby island, before returning to the shore. The fourth (possibly a Male) one swam off fairly quickly, but the other three hung around. We think we were watching a Mother with her two almost fully grown kits. The two younger ones spent most of their time playing chase, while the adult was feeding almost continuously. It was great to be able to watch so much fabulous behaviour. Elated, we returned to Lochaline for a celebratory beer.





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The weather forecast for Wednesday was for solid rain all day so I decided to spend the day working remotely from Lochaline hotel. Andy went back to the red squirrel spot on the Ardtornish estate (the correct place this time). Peter has a portable hide here, which meant it was at least possible to stay dry as long as you had something waterproof to sit on. He put some hazelnuts out (Peter has a large supply of hazelnuts in their shells) and waited, but no squirrels showed up. Peter had warned us that the first time we went this would probably be the case and it would take a day or two for the squirrels to find the nuts and then make a return visit. The weather continued to be terrible so it was quiet on the mammal watching front.

The next day was our morning wildlife watching trip with Peter. The plan was to go and look for more otters, plus whatever else we could find. We left at 9am and we drove in our car so Peter could spot the wildlife better. We headed out of Lochaline and round to Loch Linnhe. There were some wild **Feral Goats** on the beach with some pretty spectacular horns. It wasn't long before we found our first **otters** and we had a few hours of near-constant otter activity. The biggest challenge was to try to get close enough to the otters for good photos without spooking them. Luckily Peter is an expert at this and was able to get Andy in the perfect spot for some close ups (with a long lens of course). There were plenty of seabirds around too, although our main focus was the otters. We spent most of the day around the same area, then eventually decided we weren't going to do any better and left. Our last stop was to an estate where there were some **Highland Cows** which we were also keen to photograph – they are domestic animals, but really quite spectacular. There were also some (wild) **Red Deer** in the same area, as well as another **otter** in the loch – it says a lot about the quality of the otter sightings we'd already had that day that we ignored the reasonably distant otter and were photographing the cows! We didn't get back to Lochaline until almost 5pm, despite booking only a half day trip. It cost us £160 (in total, not per person) which I thought was excellent value, especially given the quality of the wildlife sightings we had. I would definitely recommend Peter as a very knowledgeable wildlife/photography guide. However, he isn't the most organised – so I would also recommend phoning him a couple of weeks in advance of your booking to go over all the logistics of where and when to meet.





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On the following day our original plan was to do the boat trip with Sea Life Mull that was rescheduled from earlier in the week. However, once again the weather refused to cooperate and it was cancelled. So we returned to the red squirrel hide on the Ardtornish estate. It was raining on and off, but the combination of the hide, wearing full waterproofs and sitting on our waterproof ponchos kept us dry. We scattered some hazelnuts around and within 30 minutes the **red squirrels** had arrived. They were around almost constantly for the next couple of hours until all of the nuts were gone. We headed back to the dome for lunch and then went back out to the same area as yesterday. We had a very brief sighting of some distant otters, but this time had a lot more shore bird activity, and also saw some **Common Seals** in the water. On the way back we found another two groups of **Red Deer**. Since we had no luck with the pine martens at the dome we decided to try a different spot and spent a few hours sitting in the car at another place that Peter knows they occur. We put some peanuts out and waited patiently for a few hours, but all we got were some **European Wood Mice**.





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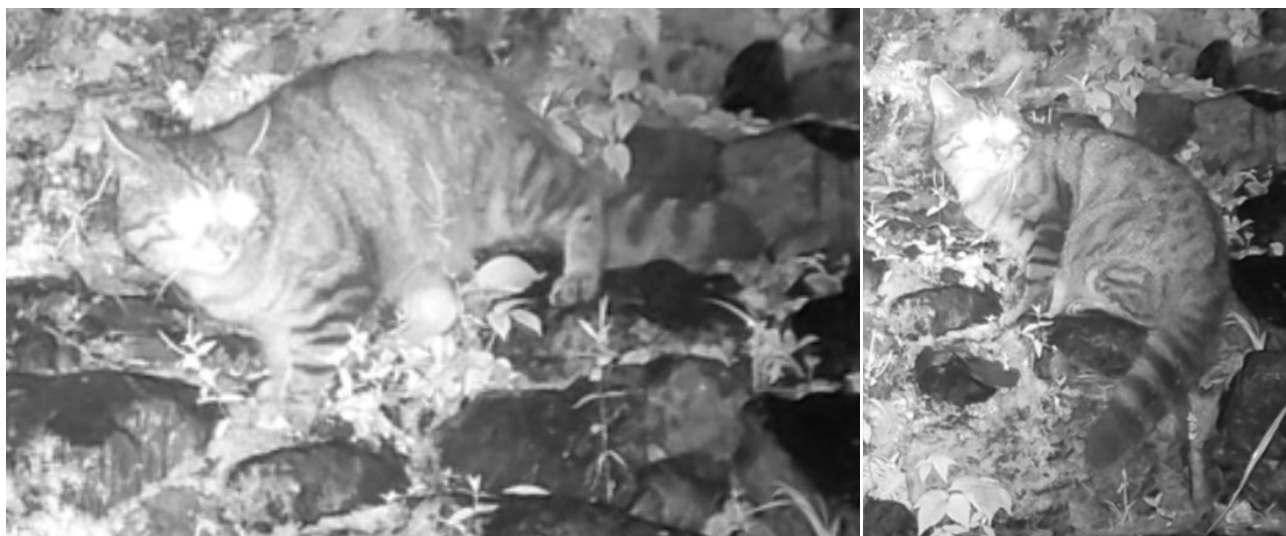
The next day we returned to the red squirrel hide, but they didn't show up. We gave it a couple of hours but then returned back to Lochaline. We would be spending the next 6 nights at the Highland Basecamp with the rest of Andy's diving mates. Each room has two bunks with an ensuite toilet and shower and under floor heating. There is a shared kitchen that is well-equipped for large groups (I bought up a load of kitchen gear with me as I wasn't sure what they would have, but I could have left a lot of it behind). We were in room 12 which was adjacent to a steep bank and small decking area where we put peanuts out every night and set up our camera trap in order to continue to try to see the pine martens. We had arranged for a Morrisons supermarket delivery of all the food that I would be cooking for the next week. The van arrived in the one-hour slot at 11am and we managed to get everything stashed away in the fridges (I had contacted the Basecamp in advance to arrange for early access to the kitchen so we could do this). We then headed back to the dome to pack up, pay our bill and move in to the Basecamp. The weather was inclement for the rest of the afternoon so I spent the time getting myself organised in the kitchen and baking some cakes ready for the dive club for the next six nights. People arrived slowly and most got an early night as many had been travelling since the early hours of the morning.

The next day was the first day of diving. It was a Sunday so I didn't have to work and the weather was good for the first half of the day so I walked along the loch back to the red squirrel hide. I put some hazelnuts out and a few squirrels came, but they kept their distance (I was a bit later than previous visits, and I also didn't use the hide). I watched them for half an hour or so and then started to return to the Basecamp as the weather was forecast to deteriorate from midday. Just outside Ardtornish house I ran into two other non-diving spouses from the dive club. They were keen to see the red squirrels so I showed them the spot and left them to it and walked back along the loch to Lochaline. About 200 metres before Lochaline marina (there is a pontoon where small boats moor up – not where the ferry docks) there was an **otter** in the water right by the shoreline. I don't know who was more surprised – it or me! It didn't hang around for very long, but I did manage to grab a few photos. I returned to the basecamp to prepare our dinner (braised shin of beef with roast broccoli and celeriac mash, with nutty chocolate orange cake for pudding, plus a veggie and bean stew for the two vegans) and do some more baking for the next week.



It didn't seem like any of the nuts had been touched overnight, but the chaffinches had a good feast on them during the day. I spent the day working remotely from the bunkhouse while the divers went diving, then cooked dinner (Pulled pork, corn on the cob, sweet potato wedges, pickled cucumber and celeriac slaw followed by chocolate brownies). I reloaded the piles of peanuts and we went to bed.

We woke up and most of the peanuts had disappeared. Andy checked the trailcam footage and a pine marten had been through during the night and we'd missed it. Frustrating – but we did have the video footage. We set up our spare Ring camera in the same place and set it so that it would alert us if it detected movement and would over-ride the do not disturb mode on our phones. Once again, the divers went diving and I worked and then cooked dinner (It was originally planned to be a BBQ, but there was no BBQ so it was cooked in the oven instead – sausages, tamarind chicken thighs, pork ribs, garlic bread and two salads, with a sticky gingerbread for pudding). We went to bed, hoping to be interrupted in the middle of the night – and indeed we were! The ring camera triggered and we jumped up to see what it was – and it was a cat. The peanuts had attracted some rodents, and a cat was having a good look around the bank, and then the wooden decking area. When it was on the bank the view was blocked by foliage, so we were reliant on what we could see from the ring footage on our phones, but it came onto the decking area and sat down. Originally I thought it was just a tabby, but then as it turned to leave it revealed its tail which was thick and bushy with a rounded end – this wasn't just a tabby, this was at least a mostly **Scottish Wildcat**. (Almost all the wildcats left now are some sort of hybrid, and those that aren't have generally been reintroduced). We didn't get any photos (the door we were looking out through was mostly glazed so you couldn't see through it except through specific places near the top), but had the camera trap footage. We couldn't quite believe what we had just seen and went back to bed.



The next day followed the same familiar pattern. Andy dived while I worked and then I cooked dinner for everyone (A starter of scallops that the divers had foraged, Italian slow-roasted pork shoulder with fennel, roast vegetables and roast potatoes, followed by pandan panna cotta with Middle-eastern poached fruit). Before we went to bed we reset the piles of peanuts and this time also added some sliced left over sausages to see what else that would bring in. Once again we were woken in the early hours by the Ring camera alarm. This time it was a **pine marten** – it was studiously ignoring the piles of peanuts put out for its benefit and was scoffing down the sausage. Andy had spent some time the previous day working out how to take some photos, and we got a couple of images out the bathroom window before it finished the sausage and ran away. We went back to bed incredibly pleased that we had finally caught up with one of our main targets.



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It was our last full day in Lochaline. Once again, Andy went diving and I worked. One of the diver spotted a **Common Slowworm** and came to get me so I could see it which was great. It was curry night for our final dinner and I did popadoms with four different dips, then Venison Dhansak, Spinach and sweetcorn dahl, coconut and cauliflower curry, spicy cabbage, pilau rice and naan. I put out more peanuts and the remaining leftover sausage and we waited to see what would happen. About an hour later the mostly **Scottish Wildcat** was back. This time Andy managed to get a couple of photos out the window, although none of them show the tail, so we are reliant on the camera trap footage for that. It made a few repeat visits over the next hour, and by the time it was done, there was no sausage left. Shortly after, a **pine marten** reappeared, but with the sausage all gone it didn't stick around and ran off quickly. We were both exhausted, and had to be up early to pack up and leave the next day so we turned off the ring alerts and got a few hours of sleep.



We left the bunkhouse by 8:30am (the road into Lochaline was closed for roadworks between 9am and 11am and we didn't want to have to wait until after 11) and took the slow road on the shores of Loch Linnhe back to the Coran ferry. We drove slowly and saw our final pair of **otters** of the trip. They only hung around for about 10 minutes before disappearing. It was a nice finale to our Lochaline stay! There were also a few **Common Seals** and some more shore birds.

We drove south, back through the Glencoe area (the rain actually stopped so we could admire the view this time) and through Queen Elizabeth Forest Park to Aberfoyle. We'd just driven past our first "Slow down for red squirrels" All images copyright Andy Goldby Freelance

sign when a suicidal red squirrel ran across the road in front of the car. Andy somehow managed to swerve and straddle it, but if you travel this route do be careful. I guess the electric car means they make less noise so are more of a risk to wildlife. We arrived in Aberfoyle, plugged the car in to charge in the main car park (where parking is free, unlike the car park near the Lodge visitor centre where you have to pay), ate our picnic lunch and then set off for a walk in Queen Elizabeth Forest Park towards the red squirrel hide. It is a lovely patch of forest, and the sun even came out. I didn't think we would see red squirrels as it was early afternoon, but we thought we'd have a look at the hide just in case. However, the hide has three squirrel feeders and there was a constant stream of red squirrels coming to take advantage of the free nuts. At times you could see 5 or 6 squirrels at once, so there are certainly plenty around. We watched the squirrels for a while when all of a sudden there was a kerfuffle and a wood pigeon flew out of the forest with a buzzard's claws gripped to its back. There was a lot of flapping and somehow the wood pigeon managed to escape, looking rather battered and bruised. We eventually left and returned to the car. We made another stop nearby to look at Lochan a' Ghleannain in the Loch Ard forest as I'd read online that it was a good spot for water voles. The water voles proved elusive, but the view over the loch was pretty. We drove to Auchendennan Luxury Self Catering Cottages, which was our overnight stop. We thought these were really nice – very comfortable and well equipped. It seemed like total luxury after the bunkhouse! We had leftovers for dinner and had an early night.





The following morning we drove a short distance to Balloch where we did a nice scenic walk. There was no wildlife of any note. We then carried on driving South with a quick break to charge the car. We detoured off the main road to stop at the Courtyard Dairy, a cheese shop I have ordered online from, but never been to before. We tasted a load of cheese and bought our favourites. From there we headed towards Northcote. We had a dinner booking at the Michelin starred restaurant. It was good, but not perfect. Some of the courses were sublime, but some were most definitely not, and the service was really quite chaotic in places. However, the matched wines were extremely generous (we shared one between us). Overall I didn't feel like I wasted my money but I also wouldn't rush back.

The next day we headed to Blackpool so I could fulfil a long-held ambition of dancing in the Tower Ballroom. We've been doing ballroom dancing for around 20 years and it was a great experience to dance in such a beautiful iconic venue. After a few hours we tore ourselves away, headed to the Tesco on the way out of Blackpool so we could stock up on groceries for the next week, and then carried on driving South. We stopped briefly at the services to charge the car and finally made it home that night. We both agreed that despite the terrible weather, the wildlife had been fantastic and we were really glad we did the trip.

Andy's diving was disappointing – the awful weather meant they were limited to the regularly dived wrecks in the Sound of Mull, and the visibility was terrible with a fine layer of silt covering everything that was disturbed by the tiniest movement in the water. However the boat they were diving from and service from the skipper were great (David from Lochaline Charters).

For those who are interested there is a video on youtube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRO_ckHT5TQ

To see more of Andy's photos from other holidays you can click here: <https://andygoldby.myportfolio.com/work>

Here is a list of all our observations: https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d1=2025-09-05&d2=2025-09-22&subview=table&user_id=jane_tours&verifiable=any

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