

Cairngorms National Park Wildlife Identification Course Description

Aim of the course

By the end of the course the participant should be able to correctly identify the major birds and mammals seen and heard in the Cairngorms National Park; know what species are likely to occur in which habitats and at what time of year. They will also have a basic appreciation of what wildlife guiding entails.

Summary

- The course will be based in the Cairngorms National Park and run over a full year. It will include a large proportion of self-study, including the production of Field Notebooks, but will include tuition in the field and classroom.
- There will be an introductory weekend, followed by four study weekends, one in each of the four seasons. Self-study will take place between these weekends, with guidance on what to focus on.
- Assessment will be split between a final assessment of the attendees' field notebooks and an assessment in the field, coupled with short written tests on identification knowledge. The overall marking is divided between them at 50% each.
- Continual mentoring will be available throughout the course, to ensure the notes and information recorded in the students Field Notebook is adequate, however a private Facebook page will also be set up and it is anticipated that the students will communicate their own growing knowledge and information between themselves, to provide their own solutions to identification issues. There will also be some assessments in the field based on specific tasks set in advance.
- The final assessment will take place in the field in spring, to include recognition of birds by sight, but also by calls and songs. There will also be short written tests to cover species less likely to be met in the field, including species found in other seasons.
- There will be three scores. Fail; below 60%, Pass; 60-80%, Distinction; 80%+ with marking based on the ability to correctly identify birds by sight and sound, plus knowledge of which habitat different species would be expected to be found in and at what time of year.
- The course is run by Speyside Wildlife, drawing on its long experience of running wildlife tours and using its experienced guides. LANTRA (a nationally recognised awarding organisation, specialising in training and qualifications) has accredited the course, so that successful participants will be awarded a LANTRA Certificate of Training.

Course Schedule

- The course will take place over an introductory weekend 16/17 March, plus four periods: Spring (April - June), Summer (July - September), Autumn (October - November) Winter (December - March).
- Each part of the course will include a weekend of field outings and classroom based activities. These weekends will take place on 13/14 April; 22/23 June; 7/8 September; 30 November/1 December.
- A mentor will be available throughout the 12 month course to discuss any problems or discuss identification of species etc.
- A Field Notebook is to be produced throughout the course, providing evidence of what the student has studied and learned. (Further details of what is expected in this notebook will be provided during the introductory weekend).
- There will be tasks set during each season with specific species or groups of birds and mammals targeted for learning. It should be emphasised that bird calls and songs are an important part of identification skills as they are often crucial to finding birds in the first place
- A list of species the student is expected to identify by the end of the course will be provided. They should be able to identify males, females and typical bird calls and songs, know what habitat and at what time of year each species is found in the Cairngorms National Park, plus any variation in plumage through the year.

Introductory Weekend

This will introduce the course, its structure and key aspects of the Cairngorms National Park including:

- The Field Notebook, how to construct it and its importance
- Managing knowledge
- Assessment
- Cairngorms' habitats
- Iconic Species - what do visitors most want to see?
- Cairngorms' wildlife in a Scottish, European and world context
- Wildlife watching - best practice to minimise disturbance

Quarterly Weekends

Each season will have a group of topics relating to the bird species found at that time of year - with resident species split through the year.

- Spring - The main focus will be on breeding birds and their songs, also some migrants. Grouse species including Capercaillie, Black and Red Grouse and Ptarmigan, also Dotterel, some raptors, divers and grebes in breeding plumage
- Summer - Continued work on breeding species, raptors, corvids etc. - consolidating and adding to what was covered in spring
- Autumn - deer, duck, thrushes - identification of immature plumages of some birds already covered and mammals found, plus eclipse plumages and migration
- Winter - Wildfowl including swans, geese and duck. Wintering waders, crossbills, winter plumage divers and grebes. Also some of the resident birds such as Crested Tit, other tit species etc. and winter thrushes

Continual assessment will take place through the year based on small set tasks and evidence from the Field Notebook. The final assessment will take place in April 2020 after the whole year's study period. This assessment will be field based, providing the student time in different habitats to identify species seen and heard and talk about what species they might expect here at other times of year and how to identify them. There will also be a short written test

Field Notebooks

These will be an important part of the assessment and will provide evidence of what the student has learned on their own outings in the area. There will be guidance provided as to what kind of notes would be useful to record - but some degree of flexibility is allowed for personal taste, as long as it is clear what has been learned. Students may use the notebook provided, their own, or even electronic formats if that is preferred. Suggested topics and headings will be provided, but how the book is organised will be up to individual students.

These field notebooks will be a major body of work capturing what the students have learned and open to other additions that the students wish to add. The books purpose is to act as a focus for their learning but will also act as a reference book in the future. The students must evidence at least 50 hours of self-directed study in the field and at least 20 hours indoors studying per quarter.

Assessment

Continual assessment will be based on the completion of small tasks set through the year but largely on the notes in the field notebooks. The evidence in these notebooks should make it clear what the student has learned and what species they feel they can identify. It should include evidence of time in the field with notes on what was seen and the level of confidence the student has in their identification. This assessment would count for 50% of the overall mark divided into 20% from continual assessment tasks and 30% based on the field notebook.

The final assessment will take place over the course of a day. An assessor will visit a variety of habitats with the student, in which the student can demonstrate their ability to identify the birds seen and heard. To cover scarcer species that may not be encountered and other habitats, there will also be a paper test with questions related to what species would be expected in different habitats and what time of year such species can be expected to be seen. The score for this final assessment will count for 50% of the overall mark.