

2·4 Habitats and wildlife



Brown hare

The Cateran Trail runs through three main types of habitat, described below:

• **farmland and river valley** • **woodland** • **heath and moorland.**

If you are keen to spot wildlife, carry binoculars and either walk quietly and alone, or seek fellow-walkers who share your interest and are willing to tread softly. Try to set off soon after sunrise, or go for a stroll in the evening. Animals are much more active at these times than in the middle of the day. Since this applies to midges too, protect your skin thoroughly, especially in summer, in still weather and near water. Fortunately, however, midges are not nearly as troublesome here as in the west of Scotland.

Farmland and river valley

The Trail begins with a riverside walk along the Ericht, and runs through the river valleys of Strathardle, Glen Shee and Glen Isla. You are walking through or beside farmland for most of its length.

The rivers are especially rich in bird life. Near rapids you might see a dipper, a small athletic bird that perches on rocks, then plunges fearlessly into fast-moving water to catch tiny fish and invertebrates. In the shallows, look out for grey heron: sometimes they stand tall and motionless, at other times they stalk their prey. In flight, they trail their legs and their huge grey wings beat very slowly.



Farmland supports a range of small rodents such as field mice and voles, and larger such as rabbits. In turn, these feed small mammals and birds of prey. A distinctive predator is the stoat – a larger cousin of the weasel, with a black-tipped tail. The stoat is extremely fast and agile, and has great stamina: it can kill and eat a rabbit ten times its body weight.



Stoat, in Strathardle

Look out for the brown hare, with its long black-tipped ears. Unlike its smaller burrowing cousin the rabbit, the hare lives entirely above ground. When disturbed, it may freeze, relying on stillness and camouflage to the last moment. Once on the move, it lopes along with apparent ease, but in full flight mode it can reach speeds of up to 35 mph (56 kph). In spring, hares indulge in mad-looking chases and 'boxing', which is the origin of the phrase 'mad as a March hare'.

Bird life is varied: the kestrel is a smallish bird of prey, sadly now in decline, which feeds on small mammals, mainly voles and mice. It hovers over the fields by sculling its wings, its sharp eyesight detecting tiny movements below. It hunts in a fast dive with its chestnut-coloured wings half-closed. Near a loch, you might even be lucky enough to sight an osprey, taking fish in its talons and carrying it off torpedo-style.

Look out for lapwings, large black-and-white birds with an iridescent sheen and tall crest. Known locally as 'teuchits', their aerobatic flight is wild and wheeling, their wings distinctively rounded. In summer you will likely see oystercatchers, their long orange bills adapted for eating cockles and mussels around the shore. From spring onwards, they come inland, feeding mainly on worms, their long bills useful for digging in fields. In flight, their wings make a white-on-black M-shape, and their cry is a piercing shriek.

Oystercatcher



Woodland



Red squirrel

The Trail passes through several large wooded areas: Kindrogan Wood, Calamanach Forest, Blackcraig Forest and the woods around Dalnaglar Castle and Broom Hill. These consist mainly of conifers grown for timber, but they also host native species such as aspen, birch, hazel, sessile oak, rowan and Scots pine. These woodlands provide food, nesting sites and shelter for wildlife as well as crops of economic value.

Scotland has 75% of Britain's red squirrel population and the Trail's forests are a good place to see them. Chewed-up cones lying on the ground are a sign that red squirrels have been feeding recently. You may even see them dashing across the road, and drivers should watch out for them. The greatest threat to the red squirrel is disease and competition from its imported cousin, the American grey squirrel. Only one predator is agile enough to catch a squirrel – the splendid, but rare pine marten. Happily pine martens prey on grey squirrels, rather than the lighter reds: reds can escape to the ends of thin branches, whereas greys are heavier and move more slowly. View and report squirrel sightings (red or grey) at www.scottishsquirrels.org.uk.



Pine marten

In spring, the forest floor may be carpeted with bluebells or wood sorrel. Look out also for yellow primrose and celandine, wild violets, and the pale stars of the wood anemone, which flourishes in deciduous woodlands.

Red and roe deer are native to Scotland. They are easy to distinguish: roe deer are much smaller than red, they prefer woodland to open spaces, and they appear in small numbers. Their red cousins began in woodland, but under environmental pressure they managed to adapt to living on the uplands and moors. So if you see a distant herd of deer on the skyline, they will be red deer.



Wood anemone

Heath and moorland

The Trail's higher ground features open moorland with acid peaty soil and a few trees. Often these are Scots pine, the only pine native to Britain. Heather flourishes in such conditions, and bilberry (blaeberry) sometimes coexists with it. All of the Part 4 walks include sections that are densely carpeted with heather. There are several heathery sections on the main Trail, for example south of Kirkmichael, approaching the Lairig Gate and on Cairn Hill, south of Kirkton of Glenisla.

The red grouse is perhaps the iconic bird of the Highland moors. Its colour is more rust-brown than red, and it is much commoner than its black cousins, which prefer moorland mixed with woodland. Its loud 'ge-back' cackle is unmistakable; and if you startle one by mistake, it will erupt into sudden flight on whirring wings.



Red grouse

Grouse need heather of a suitable range in size and age: they feed on tender young shoots, but need taller plants for ground cover and nesting. Many estates manage heather for grouse, sometimes leaving large areas charred.



If you see pathways of nibbled heather and blaeberry, look for mountain hare, which turns white in winter. In summer, the mountain hare still looks different from its brown cousin: its ears are much shorter and its tail lacks the black tip. Hare predators include fox and golden eagle.

In summer, you may well hear the burbling, melancholy cry of the curlew, like an old-fashioned kettle approaching the boil. The curlew, Europe's largest wader, breeds and lives on these moorlands in spring and summer, moving to the coast in winter. Its long, curving beak is adapted for feeding on worms and shellfish, and its long legs suit it for wading through marshes and mud-flats.



Mountain hare

Buzzards are also known as 'the tourist's eagle', because visitors often mistake them for eagles. Golden eagles have a wing-span of two metres, double that of the buzzard, and they range over remote areas: if you see something that looks like a distant plank of wood in flight, consider yourself very lucky, it's an eagle. Buzzards are much commoner, with much more rounded wings, often held in a shallow Vee while soaring on air currents. They sometimes perch on branches and fence-posts, and their call is a distinctive cat-like mewing, heard especially during spring breeding.

Buzzard feeding on rabbit

