



Wildlife Identification of the Cairngorms Qualification 2026-2027
Delivered by Speyside Wildlife
Accredited by LANTRA



"This course has been life and career changing in the long run. I have always had an interest in wildlife and the outdoors but since starting, it had been the first course I have fully committed myself to and learnt a lot from. It will help me in my career path to be a ranger. I have met like-minded people who will remain friends for life."

"The course is well structured, allowing time for teaching, discussion, personal research and shared learning. Weekend meetings have constituted a full day in the classroom followed by a second in the field looking at the practical aspects of the previous day's learning - an excellent combination. We have covered a range of topics, from migration to moult and feathers to falcons and in every conceivable way the teaching has been exemplary. "

Course Description

Our 12-month course was run for the first time in 2017 and following its excellent reception, is due to run again from spring 2026. Over the year participants attend five study weekends from April 2026 - December 2026, with a final exam in April/May 2027. In addition, in their own time, they will progress and practice their skills learnt, producing their own Field Notebook for assessment.

Aims 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 gain 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 in March, plus four periods: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter.
- Each part of the course will include a weekend of field outings and classroom-based activities. These weekends will take place, DATES TBC
- 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.

The 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

The Four 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

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.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why should I do this course?

If you've always wanted to know what the bird calls are that you hear whilst walking through the Caledonian Pine Forest, or to feel confident that you can tell the difference between a buzzard and an eagle as you scan the hills, then this is the course for you. It can help lead to a fulfilling career sharing this knowledge with others, either as a wildlife tour guide, a ranger, or simply as an accommodation provider who would like to add value to your guests' experiences whilst they are staying with you.

What will I learn?

How to identify the main wildlife found in the Cairngorms National Park by both sight and sound and have confidence to show people these iconic species. You will get to know the best places to find different things, what to look for and will be able to identify what you see. In particular:

- Be able to ID the main species of bird and mammal found in the Cairngorms at different times of year, both in theory and practice and be able to explain the main characteristics.
- Will be able to keep good records which build up an effective and reliable bank of information.
- Know how to handle a situation where you can't ID a species with certainty.
- Know the law and be aware of how to watch wildlife responsibly.
- Understand the importance of communicating effectively with guests paying for a guided day out, an employer wanting a survey, etc.

Do I need to be a birdwatcher and have some experience?

No, you don't necessarily need a lot of experience, but you do need a real interest in birds and animals – as you must be prepared for a lot of self-study. There is no quick fix to being able to identify wildlife in the field. This course will not make you an expert overnight, but it will, if you are prepared to put in the work, accelerate that process and help to make it enjoyable and confidence building.

Do I get a qualification at the end?

The course is approved by LANTRA (a nationally recognised awarding organisation, specialising in training and qualifications). You will receive a certificate from LANTRA if you are deemed to have satisfied the assessors that you have reached an appropriate standard.

Will I get a job at the end of it?

There are no guarantees, but the skills you develop offer the opportunity to find work in a variety of ways in the great outdoors. Wildlife identification, however, is an ongoing process and this course is designed to give you a good base from which to develop skills further into the future.

Will I automatically get a place?

As the spaces available are limited to 12, we shall assess from the details you provide to us on the booking form, who the course is most suitable for. You will then be contacted to advise whether you have been successful or not. Once we have contacted you, payment must be made immediately to confirm your place.

How many people will be on the course?

A maximum of 12, so there is a good ratio of trainers to applicants. The trainers are there to teach you as a group but will also mentor you as individuals.

How much time do I need to put in?

There will be five study weekends, plus a final exam day in the field. In between each weekend, as much self-study as you can manage, which centres on the production of a field notebook, detailing all that you have seen and heard in the Cairngorms. How to produce this field notebook will be a large part of the taught weekends, as this notebook will be assessed as part of the final exam.

Will there be homework?

Yes. At the end of each study weekend you will be set some exercises, designed to help your self-study over the next quarter. You will be required to keep a field notebook throughout the year to record what you see. The trainers will give you advice with this. At the end of the course the field notebook will be assessed. This will count towards your final exam mark.

Is there an exam at the end?

Yes. It will be held in April 2027 and will comprise three parts:

- A trip out with a trainer, to demonstrate you can detect and identify the birds and animals around you.
- An assessment of your field notebook, completed throughout the year.
- A short-written test

If you pass you will receive a certificate from Speyside Wildlife and also one from LANTRA, as they have accredited the course within their national accreditation regime.

How long does the course last?

12 months. An introductory weekend in March, followed by four seasonal weekends in May, June, September and December. There is also an assessment day in April the following year.

What happens if I can't attend some of the taught weekends?

The dates are fixed and will set the direction for your whole study process, so missing a weekend will set you back. Attendance however does not form part of the final assessment, so if you demonstrate sufficient knowledge on your final assessed day out, plus having an acceptable standard of field notebook and a good performance in the final knowledge test, you will not necessarily fail the course.

The dates for the 2023 course are:

Introductory weekend	March
Spring weekend	DATES TBC
Summer weekend	DATES TBC
Autumn weekend	DATES TBC
Winter weekend	DATES TBC
Final Assessment	April/May 2027 (date TBC)

What is the cost?

£TBC + VAT per person. For this you have five weekends of teaching, including field trips (cost of minibus included); advice from the tutors/guides in between times; a field guide and field notebook; access to a closed Facebook page, which is a forum for exchanging information and advice with the guides and the other participants.

Who is doing the training and the exams?

Guides within Speyside Wildlife who are qualified teachers/trainers, with a huge amount of experience running guided wildlife watching holidays all over Scotland and around the world. They are passionate about their subject; love showing people wildlife and are full of stories about their travels and experiences.

What is the closing date for applications?

01 March 2026

Is there an age limit?

No age limit.

Fitness

Applicants should be fit enough to deal with some moderate walking, generally on paths, during the field trips.

Feedback from Previous Participants

"I have learnt so much over the past year and some of the wildlife I've been able to see were firsts for me and I couldn't have asked for a better teacher in Roy, his passion and encouragement helped me to improve my birdsong knowledge hugely. This course has introduced me to likeminded people that also wanted to expand their knowledge of native species and the conservation work going on in the Cairngorms National Park, which meant I could talk endlessly to other people with the same interests as me!..... This qualification will be an asset to my CV, and I hope to visit the National Park and surrounding areas again in the summer, this time with my children so that they can also further develop their interest in Scottish wildlife."

"When I signed up for the Wildlife Identification in the Cairngorms Course, my intention was never to become a professional birder; instead, it was to expand my knowledge and appreciation of the natural world that inhabits this outstanding landscape. As well as learning the identification of some of the most common birds in the Cairngorms area, I feel that I am now building the knowledge, skills and confidence to observe and record the diagnostics that allow me to begin to identify any wildlife I witness..... The course has also been excellent for pointing me in the direction of appropriate resources so I can continue to build my understanding."

"With a very basic knowledge and understanding of wildlife, accompanied by a non-existent knowledge of birds, I undertook this course knowing the only way was up - and what an upward journey it has been! The course is well structured, allowing time for teaching, discussion, personal research and shared learning. Weekend meetings have constituted a full day in the classroom followed by a second in the field looking at the practical aspects of the previous day's learning - an excellent combination. We have covered a range of topics, from migration to moult and feathers to falcons, and in every conceivable way the teaching has been exemplary."

Our tutors have shared their exceptional knowledge and understanding in such a way that their passion has become my passion - something I never would have believed could happen regarding the subject of birds! I can't recommend the course highly enough and should Speyside Wildlife decide to run a Year 2 I will be at the very front of the queue."

