

2011 - SCOTLAND

18 May 2011

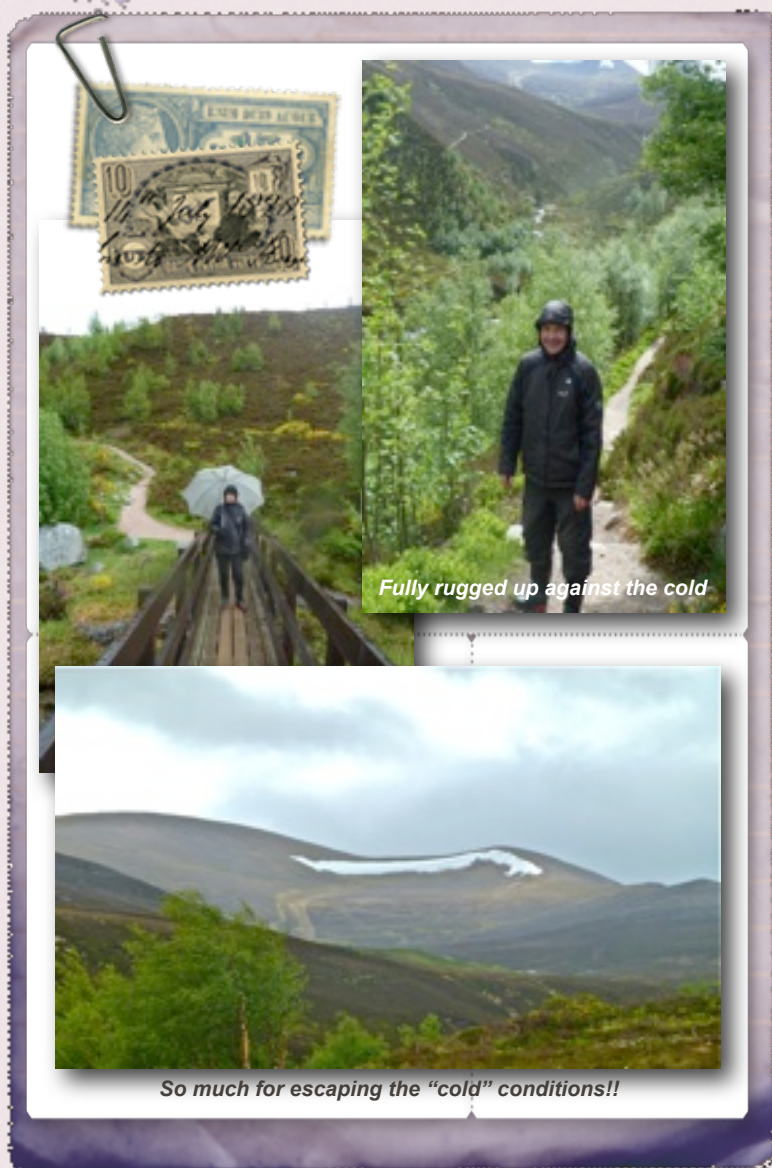
River Spey

SUB ARCTIC CONDITIONS

Heather (our clever guide) recommended strongly that we drive east as quickly as possible to get away from the cold and wet western coast and escape to better conditions. Over the last couple of days we did just that. Here we were finally driving along the Spey River valley which is described as a “wonderland of green beauty with a backdrop of gorgeous mountains”. Its a very appropriate description. The brochure goes on “the Cairngorms National park encompasses the highest landmass in Britain.” And here comes the interesting bit - “the mountain landscape of granite and heather has a SUB ARCTIC climate and supports rare alpine tundra vegetation!!!!” Sub blooming arctic!! Too right!! The mountains actually had snow on them and the temperature and wind chill made it damm freezing. So much for escaping the bad weather!! Today we experienced the coldest weather we have come across in all our recent travels (not counting the highland snow slopes of Zakopane in Poland two years go). We have never rugged up so much as today.

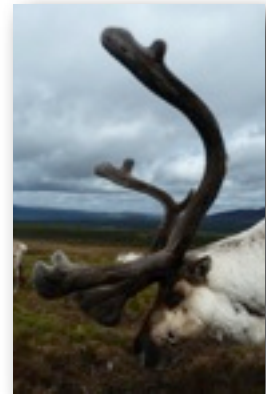
But all is well. With a warm coat and thick woolen under-clothes we braved the elements and climbed high into the tundra to visit reindeer. Then we spent more time acquainting ourselves with rare and endangered European wild animals, animals that appear to enjoy this blooming weather more than us.

Today was “animal day”. We learned about rare European animals that we knew very little about.





Up close and personal



Antlers to die for

REINDEER

Reindeer were part of the British uplands landscape until they died out a few centuries ago. They were reintroduced in 1950 and we decided that, since this was “sub arctic” country, it was time to get up close and personal with them. The guide warned us about potential “unpleasant” conditions so we rugged up and followed her in our van to a car park higher up the mountain. A further 15 minute walk and we were in amongst a herd of 25 reindeer. What a wonderful and exciting sight. They are well camouflaged and we only realised what they were when they moved toward us. As they were being fed a supplementary diet of grains, the guide gave us lots of information, particularly about their amazing antlers which were covered in velvet. They lose their antlers every year and regrow them again. The dominant male has the largest ones. We spent time with them as they took food from our hands - they can't bite so the experience was very calming. Being around these reindeer is something we will never forget and the hillside location we were in, was awe inspiring in itself.



RARE AND ENDANGERED

We visited the Highland Wild Life Park. We expected to see local animals but also saw some foreigners like elk (similar to an American moose), amur tigers (the largest of all tiger species found in China/Russia), the arctic fox (white as the snow), the european bison, and many others the names of which escape us. The drive through was interesting, but we thought that the “foreign” European animals were a bit out of place here.

The Spey Valley has a number of what are called “grey sandstone villages”. These villages had a large number of interesting buildings all of which were very well looked after and the streets were very tidy. The surrounding countryside was green rolling farming country. Cattle were now competing with the sheep for the pasture. The Grampian Mountains (yes, yet another name taken from the good old mother-land!), tower to the south. This area must hum in the winter time! Walkers were everywhere, even in this bad weather. Other activities on offer here are clay bird shooting, white water rafting, horse riding and steam train trips. Entertainment for everyone.



Reindeer appear smaller than other deer because they hold their head down as they walk to keep a low profile - to keep warm. Their noses are covered with hair - to keep warm. Their back hoofs step in the same place as their front hoofs - to keep warm. They follow each other in single file - to keep warm. They love the cold!!



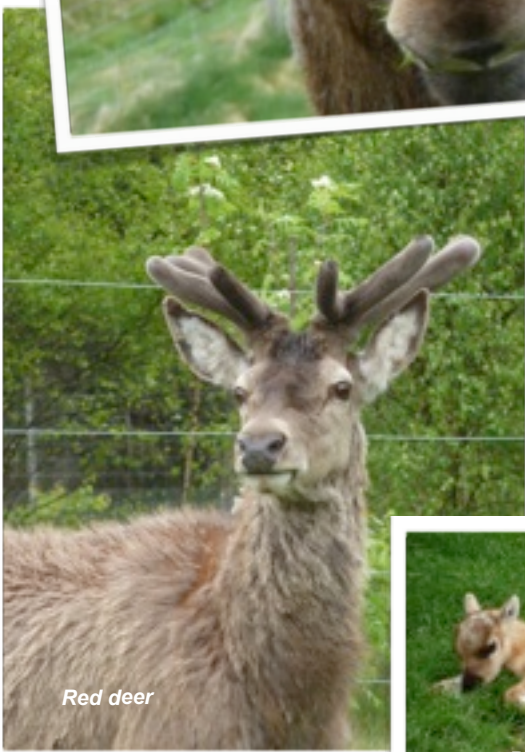
Which one of you has a red nose?



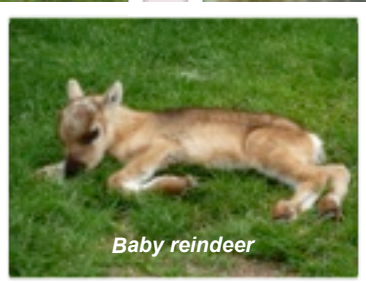
Pied Piper



Who's a pretty boy then?
Elk.



Red deer



Baby reindeer

