



## Scottish Deerstalker in Lockdown

A Positive Tale By Linda Mellor



Richard out stalking  
25 years at Corrievarkie

In 2020, we had to cope with life in lockdown because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Lockdown meant life was different, difficult, and demanding.

**The new 'normal' presented us with many unforeseen, and unique challenges. Our main focus was to stay well and follow the government guidelines. However, as the lockdown days rolled into weeks and then months, we had to find ways to keep ourselves occupied at home.**

### Furloughed

How did we cope? The mainstream Press reported people had taken up gardening. While some discovered new found interests such as feeding the birds, and cooking, others struggled to fill their days. Rural life presented an array of different challenges but when one deerstalker on a remote Sporting estate was furloughed he decided to make the most of his time in April and May.

### Singled-handed deerstalker

**Richard MacGregor, 52**, is a single-handed deerstalker on the remote Corrievarkie Estate, part of Benalder Estates, Scotland. When he left school, Richard started on a Youth Training Scheme (more commonly known as YTS) at Fairburn Estate as a trainee gamekeeper. After a number of years, he worked at Benalder, then Benmore Assynt before returning to Benalder in 1995. In 2000, he took on the solo deerstalker role at Corrievarkie on the banks of Loch Ericht. In June, he quietly celebrated his 25 years with Benalder estates. Corrievarkie is predominately stag territory, but it does hold small herds of hinds. The estate is located on the Perthshire/Inverness border.

### Love of nature

When Richard was furloughed in early April, he was determined he wouldn't sit around and do nothing. Encouraged by his love of nature and an interest in photography he started taking pictures of the bird and animal life on the estate. As he began to spend more time photographing the wildlife his interest developed further.

### Scottish Deerstalker in Lockdown

Scottish deerstalker Richard said, "I love nature and getting close to it so when I was furloughed during the pandemic, it meant I had more time on my hands. So I used my time to study and photograph nature. Photography was something I wanted to develop as I always enjoyed taking pictures. During lockdown, I

thought I'd get a few local birds around my garden and the estate, and maybe a few stags. Of course, as a deerstalker you are observant and have to be aware of what is on your land. However, when you have more time to study nature it is surprising how much activity there is and the amount of birds you'll see."

#### Variety of birds

A small plantation proved to be a haven for birds and an opportunity for Richard to further his photography skills. Each day, Richard found a quiet spot to watch the bird activity and waited with his camera. He photographed a Cuckoo, Crossbill, Redstart, Stonechat, Redpoll and Ring Ouzel. Hanging feeders in the plantation attracted the birds. The feeding area gave Richard a fixed spot to focus on. He spent many hours sitting out, observing the activity. "It was a big surprise to see such a variety of birds, and to be able to photograph them. The light was quite a challenge because the birds, understandably, preferred the safety and security of the cover in the trees. I experimented by going out at different times of the day to maximise the available natural light. I had no idea I had so many birds living in the plantation! So, it goes to show, when you have the time, you'll see so much more."

#### Garden birds

Richard feeds the garden birds throughout the year. He said, "Corrievarkie is a remote location, we are miles from anywhere, the track to the main road is 11 miles long, and in the winter we can only travel by Argo because the snowdrifts are in excess of 6ft." The regular garden visitors are Siskins, Chaffinches, Wagtails, Robins, Mistle Thrush, Sandpipers, House Martins, Coal, Great and Blue tits. Goldfinch, Bullfinch, Blackbird, Wood Pigeon, and a Jay have also been seen. "I was in the hide photographing the garden birds when I noticed a tiny blue tit had a ring on its leg then, a few weeks later, I spotted a ringed siskin. It's very odd because we are so remote, and no one, to my knowledge, rings birds around here."

#### Haven for wildlife

Corrievarkie is a Sporting estate and a haven for wildlife; Sea Eagles and Golden Eagles are seen regularly, so are Kestrels, Sparrow Hawks and Merlins. There are coveys of Grouse, Mountain Hares and Snipe. On the high-tops there

are Ptarmigan and Golden Plover. In June, Richard enjoyed watching the hinds with their new calves and Sandpipers sheltering their young under their wings. On his travels locally, he has also photographed Blackcock, Curlews, Red Squirrels, Brown Hares, Common Greenshank, Little Grebe, Roe deer, Black-throated Divers and Lapwings with their chicks.

Positive experience

“The Pandemic was a shock to us all, and no-one saw it coming or knew how to prepare. Looking back at the months I was furloughed, I like to think my experience was a positive one.” Richard started to use Instagram and Facebook to share his wildlife images, “sharing my pictures online has also helped broaden my social media skills, because pre-lockdown they didn’t exist!” As a Scottish Deerstalker in lockdown on a remote Sporting estate, Richard summed it up. “All nature is special but it was amazing to discover there’s so much more when you take the time to study it.”

Richard MacGregor on Instagram

Richard\_c\_macgregor



Richard out with his camera



Greenshank on a post