ISLAY AND JURA
Saturday 21 October – Thursday 26 October 2017

HEATHERLEA EXTRA PACK

Price: £945 pp,
Single Supplement: £100
Deposit: £200
Leader: One from our experienced team
Max group size: 7 clients.

HEATHERLEA BIRDWATCHING
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Islay is a beautiful island, with soft rolling scenery and a wonderful variety of birdlife. We explore the large goose flocks of the fields and RSPB Loch Gruinart, and expect to see many thousand Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Goose. The sight (and the noise) is absolutely unforgettable. We might also find Brent (pale-bellied), Greylag, Pink-footed and perhaps wild Canada Goose, but our real effort will go into rarity hunting! Snow Goose, Red-breasted Goose, Richardson’s Canada Goose (‘Cackling Goose’ in America) and Green-winged Teal were all seen in the last few years. Our mobile-hide minibus will be invaluable here!

Britain’s most northerly Chough population breeds on Islay, and we should see these birds floating on the breeze at very close quarters. There are many ducks here, including a large overwintering raft of Scaup, and we should see Long-tailed Duck, Common Scoter, Teal, Wigeon, Mallard, Shelduck, Tufted Duck and perhaps Slavonian Grebe. We search the waters below for all three diver species, Black Guillemot and other auks, and perhaps rare winter visitors such as Glaucous Gull and Iceland Gull. The duck concentrations may receive an unwelcome visit from a Hen Harrier, and we will watch out for the island’s local Golden Eagles, which often passes between two high spots we will visit. Other raptors found on Islay include Peregrine, Merlin, Buzzard, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk.

Wader species of interest may include a late Ruff as well as Golden Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Sanderling and Purple Sandpiper.

We watch the weather, tide table and ferry timings, and select a day to visit Jura. Much more rugged and inhospitable than Islay, Jura is well worth a visit for the scenery alone, and is rightly renowned for its large population of Red Deer, Hen Harrier and recently White-tailed Eagle. We also hunt for Otter along the coastline.

Finally we use local knowledge to turn up any rarities which may be around – anything can happen on the Scottish islands!

We stay in comfortable en-suite accommodation.
Day 1 (Saturday)
Depart Nethybridge for Islay via the Kennacraig ferry. From the decks, we should see Black Guillemot, Eider, Fulmar and gulls, with scarcer seabirds possible depending on the winds. The crossing here is renowned for divers, with double figure counts of Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern Divers if weather allows. Islay is a beautiful island, with soft rolling scenery and a wonderful variety of birdlife. This holiday will give you the best birding available on the island, with particular emphasis on the huge goose flocks. We will begin to see geese almost immediately, with Greylag and the first Barnacle Goose showing as we drive. A few fresh in Pale-bellied Brent Goose can be expected, and waders may include Purple Sandpiper, Turnstone and Sanderling. We stay throughout in comfortable en-suite accommodation.
Day 2 (Sunday) - Day 5 (Wednesday)
We will explore the large fields and mixed farmland of the west of the island, taking lots of time at RSPB Loch Gruinart, where we expect to see many thousand Barnacle and several hundred Greenland White-fronted Goose. The sight (and the noise) of these flocks is a must to experience – absolutely unforgettable, and on a couple of evenings we will close the day at last light so that we see and hear the mass movement of geese coming into the communal roosts. Driving back in the low light we may even see a Barn Owl if we are lucky!

Out and about, we will find Greylag, and perhaps Pink-footed or Bean Goose, but our real effort will go into rarity hunting! Snow Goose, Ross's Goose, Red-breasted Goose, Richardson's and Ridgway's Cackling Goose and Taverner's and Todd's Canada Goose and Green-winged Teal were all seen in the last few years. Our mobile-hide minibus will be invaluable here as we scour the flocks, or we may use some of the excellent hides so that we can set up our scopes in shelter. Working through large flocks of Teal and Wigeon is a highlight - the birds are back to their finest plumage and in low autumn light are a joy to behold, especially with Pintail and Shoveler for company! Other highlights include seawatching for divers, scoter, Scaup and occasional Long-tailed Duck, or walking in the machair enjoying close views of Chough, perhaps with flashing views of Merlin or Snow Bunting, or close Brown Hare views. Frequently mentioned in guest feedback is the sight and sound of freshly arrived Whooper Swans in the fields and wetlands, and frequently overhead in large skeins as many pass through at our time of visit.

This holiday really gives a full picture of the Queen of the Hebrides, giving us the opportunity to explore all of the hidden corners, not just the famous bird reserves. We find that these hidden beaches and quiet back roads are where we find more Twite, Golden Eagle and Merlin than the main listed sites. Of special note are Bunnahabhain, Claggain Bay, Kilchoman and the Rhinns of Islay.

We will select the best day to go to Jura, to maximise our chances of seeing key wildlife. Jura is a superb place to see Red Deer at close quarters (Jura means Deer Island and there are around 5000 here!). It is also excellent for both species of Eagle, Hen Harrier and Raven. We have rarely failed to see Otter well here too, and will time our visit according to the tide and wind so that we can maximise our chances, with Common and Grey Seals likely too.

Day 6 (Thursday) Today we return to Nethy Bridge by minibus. If you prefer, you may join/depart the holiday at Kennacraig ferry point, or at Oban or Fort William en route. This morning ferry offers us a second chance at pelagic seabirds, divers and cetaceans, and is a fine way to leave Islay, with the Mull of Kintyre and Northern Ireland on the horizon. We will break the journey a few times en route, with a stop in Oban to look for scarcer gulls always popular.
Field Notes

Climate on Islay is usually milder than on islands further west, though you can still expect a wide variation in weather conditions. Sunshine, rain and cold winds are all possible, and you will probably experience a bit of everything. Biting insects are not expected. Please bring walking boots or shoes, weatherproof clothing and a small rucksack. We will spend a lot of time using our minibus as a mobile hide, for working through waders, geese and ducks when at close quarters. We will undertake a few optional walks, with the longest being at the Oa RSPB reserve (if weather permits). This is an undulating walk, often wet in places and is around 3 miles return. The other walks are short and on mostly level ground.

Please note that this is a natural history themed itinerary. There are no planned excursions to any of the famous whisky distilleries, but we will pass most of them if guests wish to arrange a visit (at the expense of their own wildlife watching!). In our experience, the best way to enjoy whisky on Islay is to stay at a good hotel like the one we use, with a superb range of all of the malt whiskies and extremely knowledgeable and friendly staff to help you learn your West Coast and Island malts! On this holiday we will also pass some key historical sites, where we would be happy to stop to allow for a short exploration. Of particular note are Finlaggan, the former seat of the Lord of the Isles, and the church and Celtic cross at Kildalton.

What's included in your Islay and Jura holiday price

- Five nights comfortable en-suite hotel or guest house accommodation on Islay. Guests are never expected to share. Full details with your joining pack. Rooms are en-suite.
- Full Scottish breakfast and dinner from Saturday evening till Thursday morning, packed lunch Saturday - Thursday.
- All transfers by comfortable minibus and Caledonian Macbrayne ferries. Return ferry crossing to Jura. Drivers can leave vehicles safely parked at The Mountview Hotel or at Kennacraig ferry terminal.
- Guidance from a professional Group Leader.
- Courtesy bus service to ongoing transport in Aviemore.

What's not included in your Islay and Jura holiday price

- Insurance, drinks and other items of a personal nature.
- Extra night in Nethybridge area on Thurs. B&B can be arranged for you if requested at time of holiday booking.
- Collection from Aviemore on the day before the start of the holiday.
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Heatherlea is THE company for top quality birding holidays in Scotland, chosen by more and more birders each year. Relax and enjoy first-rate birding with Scotland’s best guiding team, as we do all the planning! Our fully inclusive guided holidays concentrate on the real experience, and we take time to ensure that each of our guests enjoys everything we do. Above all, we make it our business to show key wildlife to you.

These popular holidays are carefully designed to explore the beautiful and wildlife-rich Scottish islands and far west coast. Many itineraries are unique, designed to give you the best of island wildlife at the best time of year. All are run at a leisurely pace, though we might move a little faster when rare migrants and vagrants are in our sights!

* We have been organising birding and wildlife holidays for over 25 years, and have a highly experienced and capable team. We also offer a telephone and email service outside normal office hours.
* Heatherlea Scottish Island Adventures have a maximum ratio of 7 clients per guide, putting the emphasis on personal service, and helping you get the best possible experience.
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* Heatherlea is a limited company, registered in Scotland. We are also registered to pay VAT, which is included in your holiday price as quoted on this page.
* Once your holiday is confirmed in writing by us, we promise not to surcharge the price for any reason.

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Saturday 24th October

We started early in Nethy Bridge, leaving after breakfast so that we could take our time on the windy route south and west. First stop at the Corran Ferry, where we stretched our legs and enjoyed a look out over Loch Linnhe. Here we recorded our first Eider and Shag of the trip. We headed south towards Oban, seeing some wonderful roadside Red Deer on the way. In Oban the rain was heavier, curtailing our birding along the shoreline. Instead we took coffee at the harbour, and thankfully the weather looked much brighter for the rest of the day. Just the usual gulls in Oban, with no scarcities. Waders included Oystercatcher here. We continued on our scenic journey south, making a brief stop on the shores of Loch Fyne, just before Tarbert. Here we scanned out over the sealoch, seeing Gannets, Black Guillemot, Red-breasted Merganser and a single Slavonian Grebe. We continued on to Kennacraig, taking lunch in the ferry queue. New birds here included a Sparrowhawk and Rock Pipit.

The ferry ride was breezy, but not rough, so we stayed outside for the duration. There were numerous Great Northern Divers, somewhere around 25+ just on one side of the boat. As we headed out into more open waters, we soon recorded numbers of Razorbill, with Guillemots replacing them as we got further out. Good views were had of Kittiwake and Gannet too. As we neared the Sound of Islay, the view over
Jura was simply stunning, illuminated in the low autumnal light. Closing in to Jura, Alan picked up an adult White-tailed Eagle over the near headland. It was a good prolonged view, aided by the lovely light. It even dropped down and splashed its claws in the sea, either fishing or aiming for a bird! A little further along and another White-tail, almost certainly its mate. What a start! We landed on Islay and headed straight to Bunnahabhain distillery, where on arrival we found a close Otter. It proved elusive at times, but generally showed well. Alas when it caught something big, it went on to the back of the pier to eat it, unsighted to us! Two eagles and an Otter already, could we top that today? The answer was yes, as on leaving the minor road, a Merlin flashed through the village. With the wind in our favour, Phil opted to give chase, and Phil manoeuvred the bus so that the adult female was running alongside, and eventually just in front of us. It was starting to slow down, so we did accordingly and it amazingly landed on a roadside post, just 3-4 yards away. Plain view for the naked eye, but only for a few seconds. What an encounter!

We headed through Bridgend and drove along the shoreline, turning up towards Gruinart. On our drive to the reserve we clocked a fine male Hen Harrier, though the light was awkward. We closed the day at the visitor centre, scanning out over the flats below over the thousands of Barnacle Geese. Also present were hundreds of Golden Plover and Lapwing. As we were working here, a ringtail Harrier ghosted in too, scaring the small birds up. It had been an impressive first few hours on the Queen of the Hebrides. We headed in to Bowmore to check in to our comfortable hotel, a great day.

**Sunday 25th October**

It was a windy start as we headed around Loch Indaal, but we soon found quality in the form of Brent Geese, Knot and hundreds of Barnacle Geese. Linda excelled with the spot of Long-tailed Duck offshore too! We were reminded to be vigilant for rarer geese and in no time we had found one, and then two! The first was a tiny little Canada Goose, the same size as a Barnacle. This is now a separate species, a Cackling Goose, being identifiable to Richardson’s race. We were happy with this one, and then a slightly larger and paler Canada goose blundered on to the scene, a Todd’s Canada Goose. Both genuine vagrants from North America! A great start! We moved along to Blackrock, getting poor views of sleeping Scaup on a very lumpy sea! We then moved around to Bruichladdich, where we scoped Great Northern Diver and Common Scoter, another seaduck for our list!

We then headed inland, passing hundreds of Barnacle Geese, White-fronted Geese, Rock Dove and best of all, over 170 Whooper Swans, spread widely over the fields and wetlands. What a sight! We took tea down at Machir Bay near Kilchoman, recording Chough on our arrival. They showed well in the scope and eventually gave us a great, noisy, flypast. We then headed along towards Gruinart, taking lunch at Ardnave, where we scoped the loch. Lots of Wigeon, Whooper Swans and a single Goldeneye, but not the American Wigeon that had been reported. We then took a wander out on the machair and sand-dunes, recording more Chough and a Merlin – great birding!

We closed the day at Loch Gruinart RSPB reserve, where we walked down to the superb low hide. It gave us great views of Teal, wheeling en masse, the reason soon became clear as a female Hen Harrier was sat on the grass! She got up and buzzed the Teal on numerous occasions, joined briefly by a fine male that flew yards in front of us. There was wonderful birding in every direction, with great Pintail, White-fronted Geese and Barnacle Geese. A real surprise was a Hedgehog, alive and well, ambling along the bund! It was a great sight, and we all enjoyed close views as it bumbled along past the hide window! A great end to the day.

**Monday 26th October**

The plan was to head to Jura today, so we headed straight off to the ferry point of Port Askaig. The ferry crew however were not happy with the strength of the wind, which was proving stronger than forecast, so to be safe we opted to stay on Islay and try again tomorrow. The south-easterly wind does provide good
opportunities for raptors, so we took the back road from Ballygrant across the rough pasture, all the way down to Port Ellen, to see if we could pick up an eagle or two. No eagles here, but plenty of Buzzards, as well as good views of Redwing, Mistle Thrush and Goldfinch. We made a stop in Port Ellen, where we enjoyed close views of four Pale-bellied Brent Geese on the shoreline. Offshore were Shags and a few bottling Grey Seals.

Our next raptor stop was the Oa, the peninsula on the south of Islay. We wound our way through the minor roads and arrived at the Mull of Oa RSPB reserve, another working farm. As we approached the car park, a Merlin lifted from the roadside and alighted on a heathery mound a hundred yards ahead. We crept up in the bus, eventually stopping 25 yards away, a great view of a juvenile male Merlin! It flew off, but Phil had suspicions that it wouldn't be the last time we would see it! We took tea in the car park, the wind so strong that we had to shelter behind the bus! We then took the walk up to the cliffs, across the mixed habitats of the reserve. The RSPB here had planted a sacrificial bird crop, and it was holding around 50 Twite, as well as a few Redwing. All of these birds are a draw to small raptors, and sure enough, as we waited there the Merlin (or indeed another) shot through in pursuit of a Redwing. We continued on, flushing a close Common Snipe from the path. The scenery at the top was breathtaking, while the wind was literally breathtaking, it was so strong that we could hardly stand let alone catch our breath. The strength of the winds caught out many people today on the west coast today, including the ferry operators, the forecast for once being quite wrong. The buffeting at the top was easily 60mph gusts. The view down towards Ireland and Kintyre was stunning though, with an impressive coastline, superb tidal rip and a wild sea. No eagles as hoped for, but still worth the effort of the walk.

We headed back down to the car park, and as we left in the bus, the Merlin shot through and landed on a mound. Third view of the day! We headed back down towards civilisation, with Linda soon spotting an adult Golden Eagle close by. We got out of the bus, setting up scopes on what proved to be the adult pair over the far ridge. One settled on the ridge, and the other disappeared so we opted to go and look for that, finding it round the next bend, hanging on the updraft. It was a difficult angle of viewing, so we got out, gaining good views of the bird, but invariably causing it to move along. We headed down to Port Ellen for lunch, before heading east past the famous distilleries of Lagavullin, Laphroaig and Ardbeg. Birds on the way included Sparrowhawk, Kestrel and two male Hen Harrier! What a raptor day! We headed along further towards Kildalton, being distracted by a family of Peacocks at the roadside in the old victorian estate grounds. Our next stop was at the Kildalton church, home of many fine stone crosses and gravestones. The history was fascinating, but we soon cottoned on to the fact that there were at least three Golden Eagles drifting down from the hills to the pasture down the valley! We enjoyed wonderful views of what proved to be a pair of adults and their female chick. The wind was still fresh and gave them plenty of free energy to cruise around, giving the spectators a superb flying display. Linda then had another sub-adult off over the hills, with numerous Buzzards too. Whilst we were scanning we also picked up at least two Swallows, very late for this far north.

We drove along the road a little further to see if we could find a perched eagle, but the lay of the land wasn't kind so we headed back towards Port Ellen. Where the Peacocks were earlier was now a mother and calf Sika Deer, adding to our exotic species list! The light was fading fast, so we opted to close the day with the Barnacle Goose roost at Bridgend, stopping for a very close Long-tailed Duck amongst the Wigeon just outside of Bowmore. When we arrived at Bridgend there were already several thousand geese in, but plenty more arrived overhead and over the sea. It was a great show, with around 8000 birds gathering on one offshore grassy island, concentrated due to the high tide and strong winds. It was a fine end to the day, considering the conditions we had done very well!

Tuesday 27th October

Jura, take two! We headed straight along to Port Askaig, and the Sound of Islay was a different scene to yesterday, much calmer all round. We boarded the Eilean Dhura and in no time were at Feolin on Jura. We stopped at Feolin for a good scan as we had noted a seal (probably Grey) and numerous Eider. As we were scanning we picked up Cormorant, Shag, Razorbill, Wigeon and Red-breasted Merganser. Close by on the shore were pipits, a good range with both nominate Rock Pipit, plus Scandinavian Rock Pipit
(Littoralis). There were also Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails. We drove slowly along the shoreline looking for Otters, seeing only a few Common Seals. We were soon on the moorland, with numerous Red Deer on either side. Jura means ‘Deer Island’ and it was certainly living up to it, even though the majority were still up in the hills as it was unseasonably warm.

We worked our way down to Craighouse, the only real settlement on Jura. We took tea overlooking the bay, recording Great Northern Divers, Redshank, Common Seals and numerous Shags. We scanned out from the pier too, where there were Mergansers and Grey Herons. We headed up the only road we could take, seeing several Buzzards as we went. At the first close group of Red Deer outside Craighouse, we made a stop to enjoy them and scan for raptors. Linda soon picked up a White-tailed Eagle off in the distance, with Pat then picking up its mate, closer but way up in the ether. It eventually cruised right overhead, probably somewhere between 4500-5000 feet up! Still a great view, but what a back breaker! Next stop was for lunch out in the wilds, where distant Raven and a single Golden Eagle were noted. Overhead this time we had Redwing and Fieldfare. We turned around at Lussagiven, where a fine Red Deer stag was grazing away, not bothered by us at all. There were also numerous Mistle Thrush and a Song Thrush on the short turf here.

We retraced our steps, but we were not in luck with Otters today, and left Craighouse to head to the ferry once again. No new raptors on the drive back, though Sparrowhawk was noted for the 4th day on the bounce. We queued at Feolin for the ferry, with Phil spotting another eagle that quickly disappeared. We all got on the ferry despite the traffic, and were soon back across on Islay. We wanted to close the day down at Gruinart, so headed straight there, with only a few distractions from a large flock of Linnets and yet another two Hen Harrier, with an immature male and an adult male causing havoc amongst the Starlings in particular. At Gruinart we parked up at the centre and wandered down to the viewpoint overlooking the reserve. It was a great way to close the trip, as it was the best goose session we had had. It was difficult to guess the number of Barnacles that we observed here, but at least 10000, over a third of the world’s population of this race! With Buzzard, Hen Harrier and goose scarers going off in the distance, nothing was really settled, and proved to be great for getting large lifts of birds. We stayed until it was dark, a wonderful finale. Our drive back was slow too - Phil spotted a Barn Owl off to the right, and we tried our best to angle the bus so that we could see it, with just a few catching a glimpse in the headlights as it quartered the field.

**Wednesday 28th October**

We headed straight down to Port Ellen, to queue up for the ferry back to Kennacraig. It was a wonderfully calm day, with a lovely greyish cast over the sea, perfect for spotting anything on the water. It didn’t take long, we soon had Common Seals and Shags on the water, with a perched eagle, most likely a White-tail, on the headland to the west. As we came out of the harbour we started recording our first Harbour Porpoise – those that missed them need not have worried, we went on to record at least 30 different animals in small pods for the duration of the crossing! The same for Guillemot, Razorbill and Kittiwake which showed well in numbers. Best birds though were the Great Northern Diver. By the end of the voyage, Phil had logged a whopping 75 birds! Nearing Kennacraig we had at least 25 Black-throated Diver too, plus a few Red-throated Diver. These were dwarfing the diminutive Slavonian Grebes, that most people got on to.

We landed at Kennacraig and headed north, stopping again at Oban for lunch and a scan around. We closed the day with a stop at Creag Meagaidh NNR in the mixed woodland. It was a good drive back, and we arrived in good time. It was a thoroughly enjoyable trip all round and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did! Look forward to seeing you all again soon.

Phil Knott