

Birding at the top end of Scotland

This is a new tour visiting the north-easterly corner of mainland Scotland and the nearby Orkney Islands. Caithness is relatively unknown for birds but it has several important sites in a small area. Just across the Pentland Firth are the Orkney Islands with its seabird colonies and important populations of breeding species. Please note you should stay in Inverness on the nights of May 10 and 17.

Day 1: This morning we head north along the A9 towards Thurso, the largest town in Caithness. We have an afternoon ferry to Orkney with a good selection of seabirds: Northern Gannet, Manx Shearwater, four species of auks and the possibility of migrant Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas if the winds are favourable. On arrival in Stromness we transfer to Kirkwall the main town of the islands for a four-night stay.

Day 2: Today we start our exploration of Mainland with a visit to the old red sandstone cliffs of Marwick Head. During May the cliffs are home to Black-legged Kittiwake, Common Guillemot, Razorbill, Rock Dove and Northern Raven. The Loons RSPB Reserve is close by where breeding ducks include Northern Pintail, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Shoveler. Also present in the marsh are Arctic Tern, Common Redshank and displaying Common Snipe. In the afternoon a visit to Birsay Moors, which is an important area for Hen Harrier, Merlin, Short-eared Owl and Red-throated Divers.

Day 3: Today we visit the island of Hoy which is fairly mountainous in nature and holds little in the way of human population. Our interest is in the moorland birds which come to breed in the northern part of the island and includes substantial numbers of Great and Arctic Skuas. Other species include Golden Plover, Dunlin, Eurasian Curlew, Common Stonechat and Twite. A visit to the towering cliffs of St John's Head is productive for auks including Atlantic Puffin, Peregrine Falcon and rarely White-tailed Eagles.

Dates

Monday May 11th – Sunday May 17th 2020

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 7

Birds: 120-140

Day 4: A check of Kirkwall Harbour for any lingering Iceland and Glaucous Gulls before heading into East Mainland. Deer Sound is an important area holding Great Northern Diver and seaducks during mid-May. On the foreshore we should find migrant waders including Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone. Our journey continues south to South Ronaldsay and Burray which is linked by the famous Churchill Barriers. This is a good area for lingering Black-throated Diver and Slavonian Grebe. If the winds have been southerly or easterly in nature migrants may be located. In recent years this has included Common Crane, Woodchat Shrike, Bluethroat, Pied Flycatcher and Common Redstart.

Day 5: Head to Stromness for the ferry back to Scrabster. On arrival we can check the harbour for Common Eider, Black Guillemot and possibly Iceland Gulls. We follow the coast, stopping at Dunnet Bay, a regular haunt of divers, Long-tailed Duck, Greater Scaup, Great and Arctic Skuas and Sandwich Terns. St John's Pool is a productive area for birds, attracting Arctic and Common Terns, Whimbrel and scarce breeding ducks of Northern Scotland including Gadwall and Northern Shoveler. Unusual species on recent visits have been Garganey, Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked



Pink-footed Geese *Photo: Jo Finn*

Duck. Later, we travel to Broubster Leans, located in the flow country of Caithness where we should encounter Hen Harrier, Short-eared Owl, European Golden Plover and Dunlin. Transfer to Thurso for two nights.

Day 6: A change of direction today as we cross the county boundary of Caithness into Sutherland, a large and sparsely populated area of Britain. Our first stop is the Hope Valley - a reliable area for Golden Eagle, Greenshank, Eurasian Woodcock and in some summers Redwing and Brambling. The marshy areas around Loch Hope often have Whooper Swan. At Durness, the most north-westerly village in mainland Britain, migrant Bar-tailed Godwits and Sanderling are joined on the beach by Sandwich and Arctic Terns. Slightly inland the water meadows of Balnakeil often have lingering Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese and Whooper Swans. Rarities occur on a regular basis at Durness with Ring-necked Duck, Common Crane, Little Stint, Western Yellow Wagtail and Red-breasted Goose in recent years.

Return to Thurso via Bettyhill where the fields often hold Whinchat and Twite.

Day 7: We check areas in and around Thurso before making our way south to Inverness. Along the way are stops at Brora where the estuary attracts unusual birds in spring, notably Little Gull. Loch Fleet is further south with nesting Ospreys and a wide selection of waders and wildfowl. The tour concludes in Inverness later in the day.

Prices

Tour Price: £1,595
Single room: £100
Deposit: £150

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, complimentary transport and any boat fees.

Not included: Drinks, insurance and items of a personal nature.