

Late Winter birds of the Highlands and Aberdeenshire

The wild and dramatic scenery of the Scottish Highlands and the adjacent North Sea and Atlantic Ocean coasts offer some of the finest winter birding in Britain. You are visiting at the optimum time for concentrations of divers, sea ducks, geese and other wildfowl along the coast and inland lochs. In the forests and glens we have a chance of observing Capercaillie, Black Grouse and birds of prey. On beaches and exposed headlands we can expect flocks of waders, finches and buntings. Aberdeenshire is one of the largest counties of Scotland, situated in the north-east of the country. It has an extremely long coastline bordering the North Sea, and several headlands which attract migrants. Your tour takes in some of Scotland's most important bird areas including Loch of Strathbeg, Rattray Head and the Ythan Estuary. In recent years, Aberdeenshire has built up a reputation for rare migrants with Snow Goose, Buff-breasted and Pectoral Sandpipers and Red-breasted Flycatchers being recorded.

■ Travel arrangements should be into Inverness and out of Aberdeen.

Day 1: Arrive at Cygnus House situated on the eastern half of the Black Isle, overlooking the RSPB Reserve of Udale Bay, for a four-night stay. Feeders in our garden are well stocked, attracting Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Eurasian Siskin, Brambling and other common garden birds. The lower garden regularly has Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting. Further inland, on the extensive farmland of the Black Isle, we should encounter Red Kite. As dusk falls, we have an excellent chance of observing hunting Barn Owl. Mammals at Cygnus House include Pine Marten and Badger, both of which occur on a regular basis.

Day 2: Udale Bay is situated in the Cromarty Firth, which is literally on our doorstep, an exceptional area for birds. The deeper water sections have Red-throated Diver, Slavonian Grebe, Red-breasted Merganser, Greater Scaup and Black Guillemot. The new reserve at Nigg Bay attracts thousands of geese and shorebirds including Eurasian Oystercatcher, Eurasian Curlew, Common Knot, Dunlin and Bar-tailed Godwit. Tarbatness is a long spit of land jutting into the North Sea. Fields attract geese, swans, finches and buntings and predatory Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. Off the coast, we should see divers,

Dates

Saturday March 28th – Saturday April 4th 2020

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 7

Birds: 120-135

seaducks, auks and gulls. Loch Eye, on our return journey, is an important roosting site for Greylag and Pink-footed Geese and Whooper Swan.

Day 3: This morning we travel southwards into Speyside and Abernethy Forest. Species of interest include Common, Scottish and Parrot Crossbills, Crested and Coal Tits. With luck, we may encounter the rare and declining Capercaillie along forest trails. Later in the day, we head towards the Cairngorm Mountains where we have a chance of locating Red Grouse, Rock Ptarmigan and parties of Snow Buntings at low levels. Early migrants including Ring Ouzel and Northern Wheatear often appear around the lower car park.

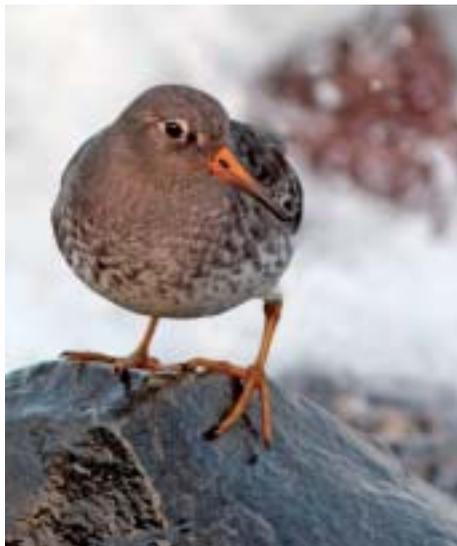
Day 4: Early morning visit to Corrimony for lekking Black Grouse followed by visits to Gruinard Bay and Little Loch Broom in Wester Ross. Travelling through the coun-

tryside, we pass fast-flowing rivers and dramatic mountain ranges to reach the heavily indented coastline of Wester Ross. An island in Gruinard Bay may have White-tailed Eagles. We have excellent chances of locating Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern Divers. Other species present include Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Golden Eagle, Common Guillemot and Razorbill. Passerines are few but may include Lesser Redpoll and Twite.

Day 5: Today we head south-east towards Aberdeen via the coastal town of Portsoy - a reliable staging post for White-billed Divers. Girdle Ness, an exposed promontory jutting into the North Sea, attracts Great Northern Diver, Great Skua and possibly returning Sandwich Terns. As we head north, we stop at the River Don for waders with Ruff and Black-tailed Godwits being possible in late March. Travel to Peterhead for a three-night stay.

Day 6: Rattray Head has a good reputation for migrants among the nettles and docks. Regular migrants include Redwing, Fieldfare, Common Chiffchaff and Goldcrest while the beach attracts Snow Buntings, and on occasions Horned Lark. Loch of Strathbeg is nearby, one of the premier RSPB Reserves in Scotland for wild-fowl and waders. We should see Whooper Swan, ducks, Pink-footed and Greylag Geese plus Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese and occasional Snow and Pale-bellied Brent Geese. Marshes and scrub lure hunting Short-eared Owl, Merlin and Peregrine Falcon. Recent rarities have included Garganey, Eurasian Spoonbill, Great Egret, Little Gull, Green-winged Teal and Common Crane.

Day 7: Today we visit the Ythan Estuary and Sands of Forvie, an interesting tidal area of mud flats, beaches, sand dunes and moor. Ythan is an important staging point for ducks including Common Goldeneye and Long-tailed Duck and in recent years King Eiders. The commoner waders occur in roosts along the river. Offshore waters have Red-throated Diver, Greater Scaup and Common and Velvet Scoters. In the afternoon a visit to Haddo



Purple Sandpiper Photo: Anders Mæland

Country Park, with its woodland and wetlands, is planned. The former has Great Spotted Woodpecker and variable numbers of Brambling and Eurasian Siskins. If time permits, we revisit Loch of Strathbeg for the spectacle of roosting geese and swans.

Day 8: Return to Aberdeen visiting Black Dog en route. Extensive sandy beaches border the North Sea. Offshore we should find Common Eider, Common, Velvet and occasional Surf Scoters. Transfer to Aberdeen airport for early afternoon connections to the rest of Britain.

Prices

Tour Price: £1,395
Deposit: £150

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

Not included: insurance and items of a personal nature. Drinks in hotels at Peterhead. Entry into RSPB reserves if you are not a member.