

Spring in the Highlands

Birding in springtime in the Highlands of Scotland is an exciting and rewarding experience. Our base on the Black Isle gives easy and quick access to the major birdwatching areas of Northern Scotland and Speyside. Cygnus House and the adjacent fields, shore and woodland have so far recorded 155 species of birds since 2003. During your stay we visit the Cairngorm Mountains in search of Rock Ptarmigan, Snow Bunting and Eurasian Dotterel. Nearby, the ancient Caledonian pine forests host Capercaillie and a wide range of breeding and resident species. During the spring, we embark on Black Grouse safaris, and further north visit the flow country of Caithness and Sutherland for waders, owls and harriers. On the west coast, interesting species present are Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, White-tailed Eagles and, from late April, Corncrakes. The seabird colonies on Handa are present from April. During spring rare migrants are regularly found and have included White-billed Diver, Ring-billed Gull, Blue and Green-winged Teals, Smew, King Eider, Snowy Owl, European Bee-eater, Eurasian Hoopoe and Great Grey Shrike on previous tours. Please note the following itinerary is subject to change due to tides and other factors.

■ This tour can be combined with Mull, Tiree & The Uists on page 23

Day 1: Travel to Cygnus House, our home situated on the Black Isle and overlooking the RSPB reserve of Udale Bay. Depending on tides, we check Udale Bay for wildfowl, waders, gulls and terns. On the lower garden, flocks of Pink-footed Geese linger into early May before embarking on their long flight to Iceland. Feeders have Eurasian Siskin and Eurasian Tree Sparrow while migrants include Barn Swallow, House Martin, Grasshopper and Sedge Warblers, Common Whitethroat and Common Cuckoo. Northern Wheatear, Eurasian Linnet and Yellowhammer occur on the entrance track. In the evening you have a high chance of observing Pine Marten and Badger.

Day 2: Wester Ross is our destination, an area of huge bays and low cliffs hugging the Atlantic Ocean. En route we stop for Slavonian Grebe, Red Kite and wildfowl. Along the valley bottom, lochans and marshes may have Whooper Swan, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Scoter and Wood Sandpipers. Our journey takes us to remote areas of Wester Ross with breeding White-tailed Eagles, and Loch Ewe where the sea loch attracts Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, auks and Arctic Terns. Poolewe often has Greenshanks and other waders, plus the possibility of

Dates

Saturday April 25th – Saturday
May 2nd 2020

Leader: Mark Finn

Group size: 7

Birds: 125-145

Otters. Nearby, an isolated village is reliable for Northern Gannet, Northern Fulmar, European Golden Plover, gulls, Fieldfare and Redwing, White Wagtail and Twite.

Day 3: A visit to Strathconon for Common Sandpiper and Northern Wheatear, and in the birch woodlands for Blackcap, Wood and Willow Warblers. Later in the morning we visit a private estate which has Common and Scottish Crossbills and, on occasions, Parrot Crossbill. We travel towards Bonar Bridge for Goosander and Red-breasted Merganser. The moors and birch forest beyond offer us Red Grouse, Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier, Tree Pipit and Whinchat. Loch Fleet is reliable for Osprey, ducks and waders. Embo is close by with an old jetty and rocks which attract waders at high tide including Purple Sandpiper, Common Knot and Sanderling. We end the day at Nigg Bay for Black-



Wood Sandpiper *Photo: Jo Finn*

tailed Godwit, Whimbrel and other wildfowl and waders.

Day 4: A change of scenery today as we head into Sutherland and to the island of Handa. Our journey takes us past lochs with beautiful Black-throated Divers. Beyond Ullapool, the scenery becomes more dramatic and rocky. Handa is accessed by boat from Tarbat. On arrival, we walk around the island on boardwalks and footpaths. Moorland sectors have impressive numbers of Great and Arctic Skuas, Common Snipe and Common Stonechat. Handa, however, is famous for breeding seabirds on its high-vertical sandstone cliffs. We can expect Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Common Guillemot, Razorbill and Atlantic Puffins. After leaving Handa we head to Durness, the most north-westerly village in mainland Britain. After dinner, we can check meadows for calling Corncrakes and, on the beach, migrant Black-tailed Godwits and Sanderling along with Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese and Whooper Swans. Rarities occur on a regular basis at

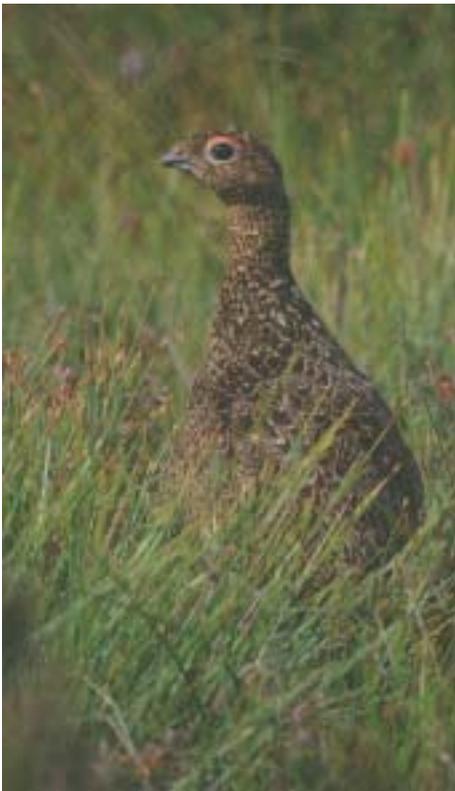
Durness with Little Stint, Yellow Wagtail, Ring-necked Duck and Common Crane in recent years. Accommodation for the night is at Durness.

Day 5: Loch Eriboll is our first destination, a large sea loch holding Great Northern and Red-throated Divers in summer plumage and, on recent tours, White-billed Divers. Nearby, the Hope Valley is reliable for Golden Eagle and Redwing. 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 Duck. In late April we may find lingering Greenland White-fronted Geese. 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.

Northern Scotland and the Highlands

Return to the Black Isle with stops for divers, ducks and Common Scoter on loch-side pools.

Day 6: Nairn is our destination today where the deep waters of the Cromarty Firth attract migrant seaducks including Long-tailed Duck and in recent years King Eiders. Portsoy is further east in Aberdeenshire and is a regular and reliable place for migrating White-billed Divers. Lossiemouth often has shorebirds including Common Knot, Sanderling and Sandwich Terns fishing in the bay. Loch Spynie is a new reserve managed by the RSPB and often attracts interesting birds in the spring. Later in the day, we venture into the Findhorn Valley for Peregrine Falcon, Golden Eagle, European Golden Plover and White-throated Dipper, the latter preferring boulder-strewn rivers. Along the Farr



Red Grouse Photo: Jo Finn

Road we may find Merlin and parties of Red Grouse.

Day 7: Corrimony is our first stop today, a remote reserve of woodland and moors. Our main interest is in locating Black Grouse, which finds a stronghold here. After breakfast a visit to the Cairngorm Mountains. Recent changes have permitted us to walk out from the Ptarmigan Restaurant, which is accessed by the funicular railway, to search in the boulder fields for Rock Ptarmigan, Ring Ouzel, Eurasian Dotterel and Snow Bunting. In Abernethy Forest, a reserve of Caledonian pines interspersed with lochs, our main interest is to observe Capercaillie, a rare and declining species and we may encounter Coal and Crested Tits, Eurasian Treecreeper, Tree Pipit and Common Redstart. Nesting boxes on the lochs lure Common Goldeneye while Greylag Goose and Goosander are regularly observed.

Day 8: Depending on flight and travel times, a visit to the Black Isle Forest is planned for woodland birds including Red Kite, Common and Scottish Crossbills, Crested Tit and Lesser Redpoll.

Prices

Tour Price: £995

Deposit: £150

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, complimentary pre-dinner drinks and wine at Cygnus House and Durness, complimentary transport, Cairngorm railway and any boat fees.

Not included: insurance and items of a personal nature. Entry into RSPB reserves if you are a non-member. Drinks purchased in hotels away from Cygnus House