

New Year in the Inner Hebrides

The island of Islay is located in the large and spectacular region of Argyll and Bute. Islay is one of the largest islands in the Inner Hebrides chain and is literally just north-west of Ireland. The mild climate attracts thousands of wintering geese, mainly Barnacle, and the distinctive race of White-fronted Goose on the fields and moors. Islay is almost split into two by the large sea loch of Loch Indaal. This in turn is an important wintering area for divers, grebes, seaducks and waders, which find a mild climate to spend the winter in.

Day 1: This morning we travel to Argyll and Bute from Edinburgh and Glasgow and along the shore of the spectacular Loch Lomond. Our journey takes us through increasingly spectacular scenery to Lochgilphead and eventually to the ferry terminus at Kennacraig. The ferry crossing offers us Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, Northern Gannet, Common Guillemot and Razorbill. On arrival at Port Askaig or Port Ellen, we make the journey to our accommodation at Bridgend, which is ideally situated for exploring the island and views towards Loch Indaal.

Days 2-4: Islay has many places in which to observe birds in a wide variety of habitat. Loch Gruinart, situated at the head of a sea loch amidst low lying hills and moorland, is famous for Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Geese. Careful scanning of the goose flocks may reveal annual but rare visitors in Cackling and Snow Geese from Greenland and Canada. With thousands of geese present their presence attracts good numbers of raptors including: Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Hen Harrier and, on occasions, Golden Eagle. The reserve has areas which flood, attracting wildfowl and waders which usually include flocks of Northern Lapwing, European Golden Plover, Eurasian Curlew and on occasions wintering Ruff and Greenshank. Loch Gruinart is blessed with a well-placed hide where we watch hundreds of wintering ducks including scarcer species such as Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail. The drier islands attract wintering

Dates

Wednesday December 30th 2020 -
Monday January 4th 2021

Leader: Mark Finn

Group size: 8

Birds: 90-115

Common Snipe and the uncommon Water Rail. The surrounding dykes and damper areas attract Barn Owl and Eurasian Woodcock at dusk, along with the spectacle of geese coming in to roost.

Ardnave Point, a remote peninsula, juts out towards Colonsay. The loch often has Whooper Swans, Common Goldeneye, Tufted Duck and, occasionally, vagrant Green-winged Teal and Ring-necked Duck. The machair at Ardnave has Red-billed Chough and Twite and Snow Buntings along the sandy shoreline.

Loch Indaal, a large sea loch with mud flats, beaches, rocky promontories and several piers, almost severs Islay in two. Greater Scaup are numerous along with smaller numbers of Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, Slavonian Grebe, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and Common Goldeneye. Rocky beaches and mud flats attract Purple Sandpiper, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit, and Common Knot. The mud at Bridgend is one of the best areas for waders and we may locate uncommon birds for Islay including Pink-footed Goose, Pale-bellied Brent Goose, Red-breasted Merganser, Grey Plover and in some winters the Icelandic race of Black-tailed



Greater Scaup Photo: Jo Finn

Godwit. Near Bridgend the fast-flowing rivers attract Grey Wagtail and occasionally White-throated Dipper. A large freshwater loch often holds Little Grebe and the commoner ducks.

Woodland on Islay is generally stunted and old, attracting Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits, Eurasian Treecreeper and Goldcrest. In the open fields Fieldfare, Redwing, Mistle and Song Thrushes form large flocks before making the short migration across to Ireland.

In the south of Islay we visit the harbour at Port Ellen, which is sheltered from the worst of the elements. This is a reliable area for wintering Glaucous and Iceland Gulls although their numbers vary from year to year. The maltings around the coast attract Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer.

The Mull of Oa is close by, a RSPB reserve with important populations of Golden Eagle and Red-billed Chough and in recent years the huge White-tailed Eagle.

Islay does have a good track record for rarities and we will look for these if they turn up during our stay.

Day 5: Today we take the morning ferry back to the mainland at Kennacraig and travel to Glasgow and Edinburgh where the tour concludes late afternoon.

Prices

Tour Price: £1,695
Deposit: £200

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, ferry fares, transport and guidance.

Not included: insurance and items of a personal nature. Entry into RSPB reserves if you are a non-member.