

Springtime on the islands

The islands of Mull and Tiree are situated off the western coast of Scotland in Argyll and Bute. We also visit the rugged and remote Ardnamurchan Peninsula. Tiree is the most westerly of the islands with habitats ranging from machair to low wet moorlands. The island has significant numbers of nesting ducks, terns and shorebirds and Corncrakes, which can number over 300 calling males. Mull is a large mountainous island dominated by rugged peaks and indented coastal lochs with White-tailed and Golden Eagles in high densities. The sea crossing between Oban and Tiree is exceptional for seabirds and cetaceans. The Outer Hebrides, straddling the western coast of Scotland, is an area of outstanding natural beauty. This tour visits the remote islands of Barra, South Uist and Benbecula. Habitat ranges from the wind-lashed west coast to upland moors and bogs and, on the eastern seaboard, indented sea lochs. In recent years, the islands have built up a reputation for rare and unusual species. Extensive coverage of the islands has also revealed a rich vein of migrants and vagrants. On recent tours we have found our clients White-billed Diver, Surf Scoter, Laughing and Bonaparte's Gulls, Grey and Red-necked Phalaropes, Snowy Owl, Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas, Black-billed Cuckoo and Red-rumped Swallow.

■ This tour starts and finishes in Inverness, which has good flight connections with the rest of Britain. Clients should book accommodation in Inverness on the nights of May 2 and 10.

■ This tour can be combined with the Scottish Highlands on page 12.

Days 1-2: After leaving Inverness, we pass through Skye and on to the port of Uig. On arrival, we transfer to Balranald situated on the north-west coast of North Uist. The area is made up of crofts using traditional farming methods, thus ensuring a healthy population of Corncrakes from late April and resident Corn Buntings. Lochs and marshes have Whooper Swan, Eurasian Teal, Gadwall and Tufted Duck. Nesting waders comprise Northern Lapwing, Common Redshank, Ringed Plover and Dunlin. Aird an Runair, close by, is an excellent sea-watching point particularly in spring when, in favourable weather conditions, Northern Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, European Storm and Leach's Storm Petrels and Pomarine Skuas pass offshore. Eurasian Dotterels are occasionally seen resting on the machair. Benbecula is situated between the two larger islands. From the coast road we should see a variety of species including Red-necked Phalarope, Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck and, in May, Common, Arctic and Little Terns along with harassing Arctic Skuas. Three nights on Benbecula

Dates

Sunday May 3rd – Sunday May 10th 2020

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 8

Birds: 120-140

Day 3: Loch Druidibeg is our destination, a rather harsh landscape of shallow lagoons, marshes, and machair and dune systems. On the lagoons we should find Black-throated Diver, Whooper Swan, Greylag Geese and a wide range of ducks. On surrounding moors we have a chance of finding Golden Eagle, Merlin, Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier. Agricultural land around the loch may have Common Redpoll, Twite and Corn Bunting. In the afternoon, a visit to an indented sea loch with patches of woodland is planned. We have excellent chances of Golden and White-tailed Eagles and a range of passerines including Willow Warbler and endemic subspecies of Dunnock and Wren. Nearby, on the Atlantic Ocean coast, sheltered bays and beaches with seaweed attract Pale-bellied Brent



Atlantic Puffins Photo: Jo Finn

Geese and lingering Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, while shorebirds gather in huge concentrations.

Day 4: Morning ferry from Eriksay bound for Barra, the southernmost island of the Western Isles. The waters around Barra have recently been mooted as a potential marine reserve as they hold good numbers of Great Northern Diver, Razorbill, Common and Black Guillemots and other seabirds. Eoligarry is a good spot for Golden Eagle and the adjacent seas usually hold Black-throated and Red-throated Divers. Barra has a few small reedbeds which attract Sand Martin, Sedge Warbler and, on occasions, Whinchat. Any stands of mature trees are worth checking on Barra as they often have migrants. Later in the afternoon, we make the ferry crossing to Tiree our base for two nights.

Day 5: We start our initial exploration of Tiree with a visit to Loch a'Phuill, a large, shallow lagoon bordered by farmland and flower meadows. Loch a'Phuill often has Common Tern, Water Rail, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal, Tufted Duck and rarer breeding species in Northern

Shoveler and Northern Pintail, whilst Whooper Swans occasionally over-summer. On our return to Scarinish, a stop at The Reef is productive for flocks of north-bound European Golden Plovers and prospecting Arctic Terns. Balephetrish Bay has Great Northern Diver, Arctic and Little Terns, Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Ruddy Turnstone. Farmland is an important factor on Tiree for nesting Common Snipe, Northern Lapwing, Dunlin, Common Redshank, Rock Dove, Eurasian Skylark, Raven, Hooded Crow, Twite, Reed Bunting and substantial numbers of Corncrakes. Tiree holds around 300 pairs of this rare and declining species and we have excellent opportunities to locate one giving its distinctive 'crex-crex' calls during daytime.

Day 6: From Tiree we board a morning ferry bound for Oban, our base for the next two nights. Sea birds from the ferry include Northern Gannet, Manx Shearwater, European Storm-petrel, Great, Arctic, Pomarine and, occasionally, Long-tailed Skuas, Common Guillemot, Razorbill and Atlantic Puffin. Cetaceans are often observed and Atlantic White-sided Dolphin, Harbour Porpoise, Minke Whale and the

huge Basking Shark are all possible. From Oban we head south to Loch Nell, an enclosed freshwater loch surrounded by woodland. On the loch, Little Grebes and Mute Swans are present with the nearby woodlands alive with the songs of Willow Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Blackcap and, sometimes, Pied Flycatchers. Glen Loran is nearby, a site for Whinchat, Grey Wagtail and the highly localised Garden Warbler.

Day 7: Oban is the departure point for Mull and we make a day trip to the island. Reaching Mull, we head to Lochdon, a small shallow sea loch. Common and Arctic Terns fish on the loch edge while resident species include Red-breasted Merganser and Common Eider. White-tailed Eagle and Common Buzzard are frequently seen hunting overhead or sitting in large trees. Passage waders occurring in Lochdon usually include Grey Plover, Sanderling, Knot, Bar and Black-tailed Godwits, Green Sandpiper and Ruff. Glen More is a long, wide, open valley flanked by mountains and patches of conifer plantations. Glen More is an important area for birds on Mull and an optimum site for upland species. Careful scrutiny may reveal Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier, Short-eared Owl and Raven. Lower down in the valley, Eurasian Curlew, Common Cuckoo, Whinchat, Common Stonechat, Wood Warbler and Northern Wheatear breed. Before returning to Craignure, we visit the capital of Mull - Tobermory. This picturesque town is home to Dipper and, on occasions, white-winged gulls. Return to Oban for the night.

Day 8: We leave Oban and head north to the remote and rugged Ardnamurchan peninsula. Our main interest is Glenborrowdale, an oak wood with stands of pines and adjacent moors. Typical woodland species include Common Redstart, Wood Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher. On the moors, we may find Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier, European Golden Plover, Ring Ouzel and Whinchat. We return to Inverness in the late afternoon where the tour concludes.



Great Skua Photo: Jo Finn

Prices

Ground Price: £1,995
Single room: £150
Deposit: £200

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

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