

Autumn migration in the Northern Isles

The remote Shetland Islands are closer to Scandinavia than the Scottish mainland and are approximately 90 miles in length. The islands have in recent years seen a surge in birders seeking to find their own rarities in a stark but beautiful landscape at the very northern tip of the British Isles. The list of rarities found in recent autumn tours is impressive with many species from the east which make landfall on migration. If the winds are of a westerly direction there is the prospect of species from North America. We have two bases on Shetland giving us good access to all the birding sites.

■ The following itinerary is only a guide and it is likely diversions to see rare birds will be made.

■ Please note it is advisable to arrive in Shetland on October 2nd.

Days 1-4: Our base is at Sumburgh Head, which is ideally situated for visiting the southern half of Mainland Shetland. The hotel gardens often have migrants and is a rarity hotspot itself. Our precise plan is dependent on the prevailing weather conditions and news of recent arrivals. We visit a number of sites in the southern part of Shetland mainland. Sumburgh Head and Grutness are well known for migrants which may include Siberian Stonechat, wheatears, Marsh Warbler, Richard's Pipit, Red-backed Shrike and Eurasian Wryneck. Open ground and stone walls are important for tired migrants and we search these for anything of interest, especially warblers, thrushes and flycatchers.

Pool of Virkie attracts waders with Black-tailed Godwit and Curlew Sandpiper being regular visitors and occasional rarities including Killdeer. Nearby gardens lure migrants which have included



Radde's Warbler Photo: Neil Norvock

Dates

**Saturday October 3rd – Saturday
October 10th 2020**

Leader: Simon MacLaughlin

Group Size: 8

Birds: 100-120

Western Bonelli's Warbler. Virkie willows are a reliable spot for Yellow-browed Warbler, a regular autumn migrant on the islands. They are often joined by annual migrants in the form of Barred and Icterine Warblers, Red-backed Shrike and Common Rosefinch. Rarer species noted in recent years include Lanceolated and Arctic Warblers, Red-flanked Bluetail and Great Snipe. Quendale Mill with its habitat of damp vegetation can sometimes be good for warblers with recent records of River and Syke's.

Places such as Scatness, Exnaboe and Toab are locations likely to be on the agenda for interesting migrants. Many of the species associated with Fair Isle are possible, and mouth-watering rarities often appear at these locations during the autumn. Rarer species seen in this area have included Pallid Harrier, Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Citrine Wagtail. Loch of Spiggie attracts wildfowl including Common Goldeneye, Eurasian Wigeon, Whooper Swan, Greylag Geese and in 2018 Pied-billed Grebe and Lesser Scaup.



Common Eiders *Photo: Jo Finn*

We also explore other locations further north on the mainland with the plantations of Kergord, Vidlin and Voe having more cover than much of Shetland and hence often encourage tired migrants to linger a little longer. Recent visits have produced Long-eared Owl, Brambling and Red-breasted Flycatcher. The numerous mussel farms attract Slavonian Grebe, Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Eider and more recently Surf Scoter and King Eider.

Days 5-7: These three days have been set aside to explore the extreme north of Shetland with visits to the islands of Fetlar, Yell and Unst. Our base is at Saxa Vord. All of the islands have easy access via ferry services and their remoteness and birding potential is huge. Unst is the most northerly of the islands and we concentrate on the sycamore plantations and gardens at Norwick, Uyeasound and Baltasound. Recent visits have produced sightings of Lesser Whitethroat, Eastern Yellow and Citrine Wagtails, Blyth's Reed Warbler and Barred Warbler. There is always something unexpected with the possibility of Snowy Owl or a vagrant wader from North America. Yell is the second largest of the islands with Yell Sound being important for passage and wintering birds including Common Eider and Long-tailed Duck.

Fetlar is a small and compact island where a search of gardens and crofts may be productive for migrants. Recent sightings have included Olive-backed Pipit and Greenish Warbler. It is also possible to have falls of Redwing, Fieldfare and, more rarely, Ring Ouzel during our visit.

Day 8: Travel back south to Lerwick with birding stops en route. The tour concludes after lunch in order to catch connecting flights back to mainland UK.

Prices

Ground Price: £1,495
Single room: £150
Deposit: £150

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, complimentary transport, permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: travel to and from Shetland, accommodation in Shetland on October 2nd, drinks, insurance, and items of a personal nature.

* Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights.