

Autumn migrants and birds of N Ireland and Donegal

Northern Ireland and Donegal are relatively under-watched by visiting birders from the United Kingdom. This tour is timed to maximise the opportunity to locate scarce species from North America and the southbound migration of geese, swans and wildfowl from further north and east. Our tour takes in a diverse range of habitats including Strangford Lough and Lough Beg, Bann Estuary and Lough Foyle. We also spend a few days birding in Donegal, the most north-westerly county in the Republic of Ireland. Our main objective here is visiting the remote island of Tory and the rugged north-west coast of Donegal. Malin Head is an excellent sea-watching point in favourable conditions whilst Lough Swilly attracts a wide range of water birds. Recent rarities at this time of the year have included Snowy Owl, American Golden Plover, Buff-breasted and Baird's Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher and Black Brant.

■ Please note you should arrive in Belfast on the evening of October 16th. The itinerary below is subject to change due to weather conditions and incoming flight times from Inverness.

Day 1: The tour commences in Belfast from where we head to Castle Espie. Strangford Lough is famous for its thousands of Pale-bellied Brent Geese and, occasionally, Black Brant which feed on expanses of eel grass. Waders use the lough on a regular basis with huge numbers of Eurasian Oystercatcher, Common Redshank, Dunlin, Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwits. Adjacent fields harbour Common Stonechat, Linnet, Twite, Tree Sparrow and Reed Bunting. One-night stay at Castle Espie.

Day 2: After breakfast, we head west towards the Myroe Levels in County Londonderry. In recent autumns, the levels have attracted White-rumped, Buff-breasted and Pectoral Sandpipers, and American Golden Plover among flocks of European Golden Plovers. Lough Foyle is close by, an important area for Whooper and Bewick's Swans, Pale-bellied Brent, Greenland White-fronted and Greylag Geese and concentrations of Eurasian Wigeon and other ducks. Transfer to Letterkenny in Donegal for a two-night stay.

Day 3: This morning we drive north to Malin Head, the most northerly point in mainland Ireland. If north-west winds are

Dates

Saturday October 17th – Sunday
October 25th 2020

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 8

Birds: 100-120

blowing, we expect a range of seabirds including Manx and Sooty Shearwaters, Leach's Petrel, Sabine's Gull, Great and Arctic Skuas and, possibly, Little Auks. Grassy areas around Malin Head regularly attract Red-billed Choughs. In the afternoon, we visit Lough Swilly, a long sea lough with a variety of habitats. Shallower waters lure Great Northern and Red-throated Divers and Slavonian Grebes. Shorebirds are few but we may find more unusual species in Ruff, Little Stint and Spotted Redshank, and wintering 'Icelandic' Black-tailed Godwits. Raptors present include Common Buzzard, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin and, on occasions, Short-eared Owls. Lough Swilly regularly attracts wildfowl from North America with recent sightings of Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup.

Days 4-5: An early start in order to catch

the ferry across to Tory Island, situated eleven kilometres off the Donegal coast. The island is isolated with a population of a few hundred Gaelic-speaking people. Due to its unique geographical location, anything may appear in this under-watched birding location. There is very little in the way of cover on the island apart from low bushes and stone walls. We hope to locate passerine migrants which have in the past included Grey Phalarope, Barred and Yellow-browed Warblers, Common Redpoll (Greenland races), Common Rosefinch, Snow and Lapland Buntings and a host of seabirds passing offshore. If a westerly air-flow is blowing, the possibility of North American passerines is high. Two-night stay on Tory Island. Seawatching off Tory can be productive for Great, Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas, European Storm and Leach's Storm Petrels.

Day 6: Today we leave Tory Island. Once on the mainland, we continue westwards to Sheskinmore Loch adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean. Sheskinmore has a wide range of habitats in a relatively small area and has the potential to attract North American passerines. Other species we may encounter include Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Geese, Common Redpoll, Snow Bunting and, occasionally, Lapland Buntings. Transfer to Bruckless for two nights.

Day 7: Today we travel to the town of Donegal and Donegal Bay, the latter being an important region for birds. En route we visit Killybegs Harbour, the centre of Ireland's deep-sea fishing fleet. Although this is early in the 'gull season', we may locate American Herring, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls. Careful scanning of Donegal Bay may reveal Black-throated Diver, Common, and more rarely Velvet and Surf Scoters, Greater Scaup, Long-tailed Duck, Common Eider and Red-breasted Mergansers. Along the shore, Purple Sandpiper, Dunlin, Sanderling, Greenshank and Bar-tailed Godwits occur in varying numbers.

Day 8: We leave Donegal, enter Northern Ireland and visit the Bann Estuary near

Coleraine which has a reputation for rare waders with records of Long-billed Dowitcher and Wilson's Phalarope. Commoner waders comprise Dunlin, Knot and Curlew Sandpipers. Lough Beg is nearby, adjoining Lough Neagh, the largest body of fresh water in the British Isles. Our interest is along the north-west shore of Lough Beg which attracts a wide range of shorebirds with Little Stint, Common and Jack Snipe and the possibility of North American vagrants. Open water holds diving ducks, mainly Common Pochard, Tufted Duck and Common Goldeneye. Overnight stay at Portstewart.

Day 9: After breakfast, we make the short journey to Belfast airport where the tour concludes.

Prices

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

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

Not included: flights to and from Belfast (it is recommended to fly in and out of Belfast City Airport), insurance and items of a personal nature.

Comfortable accommodation with en-suite facilities within Ireland. Guesthouses at Letterkenny and Tory Island. Transport by 9-seater minibus. Short to medium walks on roads, tracks and footpaths. Warm clothing and stout waterproof footwear are recommended.