

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, plus a good population of 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, North and 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 and extensive coverage has 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 8th and 16th. This tour can be combined with the Scottish Highlands tour on page 23.

Days 1-2: After leaving Inverness, we pass through Skye and on to the port of Uig. On arrival, we transfer to Balranald, which is situated on the north-west coast of North Uist. The area is made up of crofts that use traditional farming methods, thus ensuring a healthy population of migrant Corncrakes 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. Close by, Aird an Runair is an excellent seawatching point, particularly in spring when favourable weather conditions can result in Northern Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, European and Leach's Storm Petrels and Pomarine Skuas passing 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,

Dates

Sunday May 9th – Sunday May 16th
2021
Leader: Mark Finn
Group Size: 8
Birds: 120-140

Arctic and Little Terns along with harassing Arctic Skuas. We spend three nights on Benbecula

Day 3: Loch Druidibeg is our destination today – a rather harsh landscape of shallow lagoons, marshes, machair and dune systems. On the lagoons we should find Black-throated Diver, Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose and a wide range of ducks. On surrounding moors we have a chance of finding Merlin, Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier. Agricultural land around the loch may have Common Redpoll and Twite. In the afternoon, a visit to an indented sea loch with patches of woodland is planned.



Red-necked Phalarope Photo: George Matz

We have excellent chances of Golden and White-tailed Eagles and a range of passerines including Willow Warbler and endemic subspecies of Dunnock and Eurasian Wren. Nearby, on the Atlantic Ocean coast, sheltered bays and beaches with seaweed attract Pale-bellied Brent Goose 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, which is 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, Eurasian Teal, Tufted Duck and rarer breeding species such as Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail, whilst Whooper Swans occasionally remain over the summer. On our return to Scarinish, a stop at The Reef is productive for flocks of northbound European Golden Plovers and prospecting Arctic Terns. Balephetrish Bay has Great Northern Diver, Arctic and Little Terns, Sanderling, Common Ringed Plover and Ruddy Turnstone. Farmland is an important habitat on Tiree for nesting Common Snipe, Northern Lapwing, Dunlin, Common Redshank, Rock Dove, Eurasian Skylark, Raven, Hooded Crow, Twite, Common 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. Seabirds from the ferry include



Ruddy Turnstone

Photo: Jo Finn

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 and Minke Whale are all possible, together with the huge Basking Shark. From Oban we head south to Loch Nell, an enclosed freshwater loch surrounded by woodland. On the loch, Little Grebe and Mute Swan are present with the nearby woodlands alive with the songs of Willow Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Blackcap and, sometimes, European Pied Flycatcher. 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, Red Knot, Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits, Green Sandpiper and Ruff. Glen More is a long, wide, open valley flanked by mountains and patches of conifer plantations; it 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 White-throated 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.

Prices

Tour Price: £1,995
Single room: £100
Deposit: £200

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation, 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.