

Autumn in the Highlands

Autumn birding in the highlands of Scotland is an exciting and rewarding experience. Our base on the Black Isle gives easy and quick access to the major birdwatching areas of northern Scotland and Speyside. During the week, we visit the Cairngorm Mountains in search of Rock Ptarmigan and Snow Bunting. It is also an optimum time to visit Caledonian pine forests for Western Capercaillie and parties of Crested Tit. Other specialities which are easier to see in September include Black Grouse, Scottish and Parrot Crossbills and the first winter thrushes of the autumn. On the Moray Firth and North Sea coasts, the main arrival of geese and ducks starts along with good seabird passage in north-easterly to south-easterly winds. If the former are blowing we expect Sooty Shearwater, Great and Arctic Skuas and possibly rarer species in the form of Pomarine Skua and Sabine's Gull. Coastal scrub and bushes along the east coast often lure migrants at this time of the year.

■ This tour can be combined with the Western Isles on page 30

Day 1: Arrive at our home, which is situated on the Black Isle and overlooks the RSPB reserve of Udale Bay. Feeders have Eurasian Siskin and Eurasian Tree Sparrow while lingering migrants include Barn Swallow, Common Chiffchaff and Northern Wheatear. Common Linnet, Twite and Yellowhammer occur on the entrance track. In Udale Bay we may find Slavonian Grebe and Greater Scaup. Charonry Point is excellent for viewing seabirds in the right conditions. If winds are favourable we may observe Great and Arctic Skuas, Common, Arctic and Sandwich Terns, Razorbill and Common Guillemot, along with the most northerly Bottle-nosed Dolphins in Britain.

Day 2: Wester Ross is our destination, an area of huge bays and low cliffs hugging the Atlantic Ocean. Before reaching the west coast we visit the remote village of Applecross. Our main interest here is low-level Rock Ptarmigan which reside on the boulder fields. Further along the coast, a village has White-tailed Eagles. Gairloch and Rubha Reidh hug the rocky coastline of Wester Ross with the former holding concentrations of Black-throated Divers and other seabirds. Rubha Reidh is a noted seawatching point and, if the winds are westerly, we expect a wide range of seabirds. Poolewe attracts waders at high

Dates

Saturday September 18th – Saturday
September 25th 2021
Leader: Mark Finn
Group size: 7
Birds: 120-140

tide including Common Greenshank. Further along the coast, fields regularly host Greylag Goose and Twite.

Day 3: Today we visit Abernethy Forest, a reserve of Caledonian pines interspersed with lochs. Our main interest is to observe Western Capercaillie, a rare and declining species. In the pinewoods we may encounter Eurasian Woodcock, Coal and Crested Tits, Eurasian Treecreeper, Eurasian Bullfinch, and Scottish and Parrot Crossbills. Later in the day, we venture into the Cairngorm Mountains for Rock Ptarmigan, Red Grouse and Snow Bunting. A stop at the Ness Islands in Inverness is made for Common Merganser, White-throated Dipper and Grey Wagtail.

Day 4: A change of scenery today as we head to Caithness and visit Noss Head and Dunnet Bay, two migration hot-spots. At Noss Head, bushes and shrubs around the



Rock Ptarmigan Photo: Bob Martinka

lighthouse are attractive to Ring Ouzel, Whinchat, Common Stonechat, Blackcap, Common Whitethroat, Willow Warbler and European Pied and Spotted Flycatchers. Rarer migrants regularly appear including Wryneck, Bluethroat, Red-breasted Flycatcher and Yellow-browed Warbler. Dunnet Bay is further west, attracting gulls which have included Mediterranean, Sabine's and Bonaparte's in recent years. Within the bay we may see the first returning Common Scoter and Long-tailed Duck. St John's Loch is a privately run nature reserve attracting wildfowl and terns. On our return south, we visit Embo and Loch Fleet for waders and wildfowl.

Day 5: Corrimony is our first stop today. On this remote reserve of woodland and moors our main interest is in locating Black Grouse which finds a stronghold here. Near Dingwall we visit a private estate for Common and Scottish Crossbills and Lesser Redpoll. On our return to the Black Isle, a river complex may have Red Kite, Western Osprey and migrant shorebirds. Depending on tides, a visit to Udale Bay is planned. Shorebirds here include Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot and Dunlin. Pink-footed Goose, Eurasian Wigeon and Eurasian Teal numbers increase in September and attract hunting Peregrine Falcons.

Day 6: Today we travel to the coastal towns of Lossiemouth and Burghead in

Moray. Burghead Bay attracts Long-tailed Duck, Common and Velvet Scoters and, in recent years, Surf Scoter. Along the shore Arctic and Sandwich Terns may be present. The rocky foreshore at Burghead often has Purple Sandpiper. Lossiemouth is reliable for gulls, terns and waders including Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper and Common Greenshank. Nearby Loch Spynie has waterbirds, migrant passerines and the possibility of Eurasian Otter.

Day 7: We travel to Easter Ross and visit Portmahomack for Purple Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstone. Close by is Tarbat Ness, an important migration point. From the point we should see Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Eider, Common Scoter and Long-tailed Duck. Stubble fields regularly attract Whooper Swan, migrant geese, Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. If winds are from an easterly direction, Sooty Shearwater, Great, Arctic and Pomarine Skuas and large numbers of auks occur. We end the day at Nigg Bay for Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knot and other wildfowl and waders.

Day 8: Depending on flight and travel times, a visit to the Black Isle Forest is planned for woodland birds including Common and Scottish Crossbills, Crested Tit and Lesser Redpoll.

Prices

Tour Price: £1,095
Single room: No Charge
Deposit: £150

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation, meals, complimentary pre-dinner drinks and wine at Cygnus House, complimentary transport and any boat fees.

Not included: insurance and items of a personal nature. Entry into RSPB reserves if you are a non-member. Drinks purchased in hotels away from Cygnus House.