

# Autumn migrants and birds of Ireland

Northern Ireland and Donegal are relatively under-watched by visiting birders from the United Kingdom. This tour is timed to maximise the opportunities for locating vagrants from North America and coincide with the southbound migration of wildfowl, including geese and swans, from further north and east. Our tour takes in a diverse range of habitats including Strangford Lough, Lough Beg, the 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 seawatching point in favourable conditions whilst Lough Swilly attracts a wide range of waterbirds. Recent rarities at this time of the year have included Black Brant, Snowy Owl, American Golden Plover, Buff-breasted and Baird's Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher and Common Nighthawk. ■ Please note you should arrive in Belfast on the evening of October 8th. The itinerary below is subject to change due to weather conditions.

**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 which feed on expanses of eel grass and are occasionally joined by Black Brant. Waders use the lough on a regular basis with huge numbers of Eurasian Oystercatcher, Common Redshank, Dunlin, Red Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit. Adjacent fields harbour Common Stonechat, Common Linnet, Twite, Eurasian Tree Sparrow and Common Reed Bunting. Night at Castle Espie.

**Day 2:** After breakfast, we head west towards the Myroe Levels. In recent autumns, the levels have attracted White-rumped, Buff-breasted and Pectoral Sandpipers, and American Golden Plover among flocks of European Golden Plover. Lough Foyle is close by – it is 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 blowing, we expect a range of seabirds

## Dates

Saturday October 9th – Sunday  
October 17th 2021  
Leader: Mark Finn  
Group Size: 8  
Birds: 100-120

including Manx and Sooty Shearwaters, Leach's Storm Petrel, Sabine's Gull, Great and Arctic Skuas and, possibly, Little Auk. 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 Owl. 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, which is situated 11km off the Donegal coast. This iso-



**Glaucous Gull** Photo: Simon Papps

lated spot has 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 Whinchat, Red-backed Shrike, Barred and Yellow-browed Warblers, Common Redpoll (Greenland races), Common Rosefinch and Snow and Lapland Buntings. If a westerly airflow is blowing, the possibility of North American passerines is high. Seawatching can be productive for Great, Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas, European and Leach's Storm Petrels and Grey Phalarope. We have a two-night stay on Tory Island.

**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 Bunting. Transfer to Bruckless for two nights.

**Day 7:** Today we travel to the town of Donegal and Donegal Bay, the latter being

an important area 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 Merganser. Along the shore, Purple Sandpiper, Dunlin, Sanderling, Common Greenshank and Bar-tailed Godwit 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 shorebirds comprise Dunlin, Red Knot and Curlew Sandpiper. Lough Beg is nearby, adjoining Lough Neagh, which is the largest body of freshwater 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. We have an 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: £100  
Deposit: £200

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation, 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.