

Late winter birds of the Highlands and Aberdeenshire

The wild and dramatic scenery of the Scottish Highlands and the adjacent North Sea and Atlantic Ocean coasts offer some of the finest late-winter birding in Britain. You are visiting at the optimum time for concentrations of divers, sea-ducks, geese and other wildfowl along the coast and inland lochs. In the forests and glens we have a chance of observing Western Capercaillie, Black Grouse and birds of prey. On beaches and exposed headlands we can expect flocks of waders, finches and buntings. Aberdeenshire is one of the largest counties of Scotland, situated in the north-east of the country. It has an extremely long coastline bordering the North Sea, and several headlands which attracting migrants. The tour takes in some of Scotland's most important bird areas including Loch of Strathbeg, Rattray Head and the Ythan Estuary. Travel arrangements should be into Inverness (March 27th) and out of Aberdeen (April 3rd).

Day 1: Arrive at Cygnus House situated on the eastern half of the Black Isle, overlooking the RSPB reserve of Udale Bay for a four-night stay. Feeders in the garden are well stocked, attracting Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Eurasian Siskin, Brambling and other common garden birds. The lower garden regularly has Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting. Further inland, on the extensive farmland of the Black Isle, we should encounter Red Kite, and as dusk falls we have a chance of observing Western Barn Owl. Mammals at Cygnus House include Pine Marten and Badger, both of which occur on a regular basis.

Day 2: Udale Bay, situated in the Cromarty Firth, is literally on our doorstep and is an exceptional area for birds. The deeper-water sections have Red-throated Diver, Slavonian Grebe, Red-breasted Merganser, Greater Scaup and Black Guillemot. The new reserve at Nigg Bay attracts thousands of geese and shorebirds including Eurasian Oystercatcher, Eurasian Curlew, Red Knot, Dunlin and Bar-tailed Godwit. Tarbat Ness is a long spit of land jutting into the North Sea. Fields here attract geese, swans, finches and buntings, plus predatory Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. Off the coast we should see divers, sea-ducks, auks and gulls. On our return journey, Loch Eye is an important roosting site for Greylag

Dates

Sunday March 27th – Sunday April 3rd 2022

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 7

Birds: 120–135

and Pink-footed Geese and Whooper Swan.

Day 3: This morning we travel south into Speyside and Abernethy Forest. Species of interest include Common, Scottish and Parrot Crossbills, Crested and Coal Tits. With luck we may encounter the rare and declining Western Capercaillie along forest trails. Later in the day we head towards the Cairngorm Mountains where we have a chance of locating Red Grouse, Rock Ptarmigan and parties of Snow Buntings at low levels. Early migrants often appear around the lower car park, including Ring Ouzel and Northern Wheatear.

Day 4: Early morning visit to Corrimony for lekking Black Grouse followed by visits to Gruinart Bay and Little Loch Broom in Wester Ross. Travelling through the countryside, we pass fast-flowing rivers and dramatic mountain ranges to reach the heavily indented coastline of Wester Ross.



Purple Sandpiper Photo: Anders Mæland

An island in Gruinart Bay may have White-tailed Eagles. We have excellent chances of locating Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern Divers. Other species present include Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Golden Eagle, Common Guillemot and Razorbill. Passerines are few but may include Lesser Redpoll and Twite.

Day 5: Today we head south-east towards Aberdeen via the coastal town of Portsoy, which is a reliable staging post for White-billed Divers. Girdle Ness, an exposed promontory jutting into the North Sea, attracts Great Northern Diver, Great Skua and possibly returning Sandwich Terns. As we head north we stop at the River Don for waders, with Ruff and Black-tailed Godwit being possible in late March. Travel to Peterhead for a three-night stay.

Day 6: Rattray Head has a good reputation for attracting migrants among the nettles and docks. Regular visitors include Redwing, Fieldfare, Common Chiffchaff and Goldcrest, while the beach attracts Snow Bunting and on occasions Horned Lark. Nearby is Loch of Strathbeg – one of the premier RSPB reserves in Scotland for wildfowl and waders. We should see Whooper Swan, ducks and Pink-footed and Greylag Geese. Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese are also regular while there are occasional sightings of Snow and Pale-bellied Brent Geese. Marshes and scrub lure hunting Short-eared Owl, Merlin and

Peregrine Falcon. Recent rarities and scarcities have included Garganey, Eurasian Spoonbill, Great Egret, Little Gull, Green-winged Teal and Common Crane.

Day 7: Today we visit the Ythan Estuary and Sands of Forvie, an interesting tidal area of mud flats, beaches, sand dunes and moor. Ythan is an important staging point for ducks including Common Goldeneye and Long-tailed Duck, and in recent years it has been reliable for King Eiders. The commoner waders occur in roosts along the river. Offshore waters have Red-throated Diver, Greater Scaup and Common and Velvet Scoters. In the afternoon a visit to the woodlands and wetlands of Haddo Country Park is planned to search for Great Spotted Woodpecker and variable numbers of Brambling and Eurasian Siskin. Aberdeenshire often has parties of north-bound Bohemian Waxwings in late winter. If time permits, we revisit Loch of Strathbeg for the spectacle of roosting geese and swans.

Day 8: Return to Aberdeen, visiting Black Dog en route. Extensive sandy beaches border the North Sea. Offshore we should find Common Eider and Common and Velvet Scoter, plus the occasional Surf Scoter. Transfer to Aberdeen airport for early afternoon connections to the rest of Britain.

Prices

Tour Price: £1595
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: flights, insurance and items of a personal nature. Drinks at hotels in Peterhead. Entry into RSPB reserves if you are not a member.