

# Spring in the Highlands

Birding in springtime 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 including Speyside. Cygnus House and the adjacent fields, shore and woodland have so far recorded 157 species of birds since 2003. During your stay we visit the Cairngorm Mountains in search of Rock Ptarmigan, Snow Bunting and Eurasian Dotterel. Nearby, the ancient Caledonian pine forests host Western Capercaillie and a wide range of breeding and resident species. During the spring, we embark on Black Grouse safaris, and further north visit the flow country of Caithness and Sutherland for waders, owls and harriers. On the west coast, interesting species include Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, White-tailed Eagle and, from late April, Corncrake. The seabird colonies on Handa are busy from April. During spring rare migrants are regularly found and highlights on previous tours have included White-billed Diver, Ring-billed Gull, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teals, Smew, King Eider, Snowy Owl, European Bee-eater, Eurasian Hoopoe and Great Grey Shrike.

■ Please note the following itinerary is subject to change due to tides and other factors.

**Day 1:** Travel to Cygnus House, our home which is situated on the Black Isle and overlooks the RSPB reserve of Udale Bay. Depending on tides, we check Udale Bay for wildfowl, waders, gulls and terns. Flocks of Pink-footed Geese linger into early May before embarking on their long flight to Iceland. Feeders have Eurasian Siskin and Eurasian Tree Sparrow while migrants include Barn Swallow, Common House Martin, Common Grasshopper and Sedge Warblers, Common Whitethroat and Common Cuckoo. Northern Wheatear, Common Linnet, Common Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer occur on the entrance track. In the evening we have a very good chance of observing Pine Marten and Badger.

**Day 2:** Wester Ross is our destination, an area of huge bays and low cliffs hugging the Atlantic Ocean. En route we stop for Slavonian Grebe, Red Kite and wildfowl. Along the valley bottom, lochans and marshes may have Whooper Swan, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Scoter and Wood Sandpiper. Our journey takes us to remote areas of Wester Ross with breeding Golden and White-tailed Eagles, and Loch

## Dates

**TOUR A: Saturday April 30th – Saturday May 7th 2022**

**\*TOUR B: Sunday May 8th – Sunday May 15th 2022**

**TOUR C: Saturday April 29th – Saturday May 6th 2023**

**\*TOUR D: Sunday May 7th – Sunday May 14th 2023**

Leader: Mark Finn

Group size: 7

Birds: 125–145

\* The above tours can be combined with Mull, Tiree and The Uists on page 24

Ewe where the sea loch attracts Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, auks and Arctic Terns. Poolewe often has Eurasian Whimbrel, Dunlin, Common Greenshank and other waders, plus the possibility of Otter. Nearby, an isolated village is reliable for Northern Gannet, Northern Fulmar, European Golden Plover,



**Atlantic Puffins** Photo: Jo Finn

gulls, Fieldfare, Redwing, White Wagtail and Twite.

**Day 3:** A visit to Strathconon for Common Sandpiper and Northern Wheatear, while the birch woodlands hold Blackcap and Wood and Willow Warblers. Later in the morning we visit a private estate which has Common and Scottish Crossbills and on occasions Parrot Crossbill. We travel towards Bonar Bridge for Common and Red-breasted Mergansers. The moors and birch forest beyond offer us Red Grouse, Hen Harrier, Tree Pipit and Whinchat. Loch Fleet is reliable for Western Osprey, ducks and waders. Embo is close by with an old jetty and rocks which attract waders at high tide including Purple Sandpiper, Red Knot and Sanderling. We end the day at Nigg Bay for Black-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Whimbrel and other wildfowl and waders.

**Day 4:** A change of scenery today as we head into Sutherland and to the island of Handa. Our journey takes us past lochs

with Black-throated Diver. Beyond Ullapool, the scenery becomes more dramatic and rocky. Handa is accessed by boat from Tarbat. On arrival, we walk around the island on boardwalks and footpaths. Moorland sectors have impressive numbers of Great and Arctic Skuas, Common Snipe and Common Stonechat. Handa, however, is famous for breeding seabirds on its high vertical sandstone cliffs. We can expect Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Common Guillemot, Razorbill and Atlantic Puffin.

After leaving Handa we head to Durness, the most north-westerly village in mainland Britain. After dinner we can check meadows for calling Corncrakes, while on the beach we may find migrant Black-tailed Godwit and Sanderling along with Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese and Whooper Swan. Rarities and scarcities occur on a regular basis at Durness, with Little Stint, Western Yellow Wagtail, Ring-necked Duck and Common Crane all seen in recent years. Accommodation for the night is at Durness.

**Day 5:** Loch Eriboll is our first destination. This large sea loch holds Great Northern and Red-throated Divers in summer plumage and, on recent tours, White-billed Diver. Nearby, the Hope Valley is reliable for Golden Eagle and Redwing. We follow the coast, stopping at Dunnet Bay, a regular haunt of divers, Long-tailed Duck, Greater Scaup, Great and Arctic Skuas and Sandwich Tern. St John's Pool is a productive area for birds, attracting Sandwich, Arctic and Common Terns, Eurasian Whimbrel and scarce breeding ducks of northern Scotland including Gadwall and Northern Shoveler. Unusual species on recent visits have been Garganey, Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Duck. In late April we may find lingering Greenland White-fronted Geese. Later, we travel to Broubster Leans, located in the flow country of Caithness, where we should encounter Hen Harrier, Short-eared Owl, European Golden Plover and Dunlin. Return to the Black Isle with stops for divers, ducks and Common Scoter on loch-side pools.

**Day 6:** Nairn is our destination today, where the deep waters of the Cromarty Firth attract migrant sea-duck including Long-tailed Duck and in recent years King Eider. Portsoy is further east in Aberdeenshire and is a regular and reliable place for migrating White-billed Divers. Lossiemouth often has shorebirds including Red Knot and Sanderling, and Sandwich Tern fishing in the bay. Loch Spynie is a new reserve managed by the RSPB which often attracts interesting birds in the spring. Later in the day, we venture into the Findhorn Valley for Peregrine Falcon, Golden Eagle and European Golden Plover. White-throated Dipper occurs in the boulder-strewn rivers, while along the Farr Road we may find Merlin and parties of Red Grouse.

**Day 7:** 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. After breakfast we make a visit to the Cairngorm Mountains. \*Recent changes have permitted us to walk out from the Ptarmigan

Restaurant which is accessed by the funicular railway to search for Rock Ptarmigan, Ring Ouzel, Eurasian Dotterel and Snow Bunting in the boulder fields. At Abernethy Forest, a reserve of Caledonian pines interspersed with lochs, our main interest is to observe the rare and declining Western Capercaillie, and we may encounter Coal and Crested Tits, Eurasian Treecreeper, Tree Pipit and Common Redstart. Nesting boxes on the lochs lure Common Goldeneye while Greylag Goose and Common Merganser are regularly observed.

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

*\*At the time of writing the railway is being repaired and may not be open in 2022. If this is the case we have alternative sites for the mountain birds mentioned.*

## Prices

Tour Price: £1195

Single Room: £45 (this is only applicable to the night in Durness)

Deposit: £150

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation, meals, complimentary pre-dinner drinks and wine at Cygnus House and Durness, complimentary transport, Cairngorm railway 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.