

New Year in the Inner Hebrides

The island of Islay is located in the large and spectacular region of Argyll and Bute. Islay is one of the largest islands in the Inner Hebrides chain and is literally just to the north-east of Ireland. The mild climate attracts thousands of wintering geese, mainly Barnacle and the distinctive Greenland race of Greater White-fronted Goose, to the fields and moors. Islay is almost split into two by a large sea loch – Loch Indaal. This in turn is an important wintering area for divers, grebes, seaduck and waders, which are attracted by the mild winter climate. Please note you should arrive in Glasgow on the night of January 23rd 2023 as departure is early the next day.

Day 1: This morning we travel to Argyll and Bute from Glasgow, following the shore of spectacular Loch Lomond. Our journey takes us through increasingly beautiful scenery to Lochgilphead and eventually to the ferry terminus at Kennacraig. The ferry crossing offers us Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, Northern Gannet, Common Guillemot and Razorbill. On arrival at Port Askaig or Port Ellen we make the journey to our accommodation at Bowmore, which is ideally situated for exploring the island and offers views towards Loch Indaal.

Days 2-4: Islay has many places in which to observe birds in a wide variety of habitats. Loch Gruinart, situated at the head of a sea loch amidst low-lying hills and moorland, is famous for Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Geese. Careful scanning of the goose flocks may reveal annual but rare visitors in the form of Cackling and Snow Geese from Greenland and Canada. The presence of thousands of geese attracts good numbers of raptors, including Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Hen Harrier and, on occasions, Golden Eagle. The reserve has areas that flood and draw in wildfowl and waders, which usually include flocks of Northern Lapwing, European Golden Plover, Eurasian Curlew and sometimes wintering Ruff and Common Greenshank. Loch Gruinart is blessed with a well-placed hide where we watch hundreds of wintering ducks, including scarcer species such as Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and Northern

Dates

Tuesday January 24th – Saturday
January 28th 2023

Leader: Simon McLaughlin

Group size: 8

Birds: 90–115

Pintail. The drier islands attract wintering Common Snipe and the uncommon Water Rail. The surrounding dykes and damper areas are good for Western Barn Owl and Eurasian Woodcock at dusk, along with the spectacle of huge flocks of geese coming in to roost.

Ardnave Point, a remote peninsula, juts out towards Colonsay. The loch often has Whooper Swans, Common Goldeneye, Tufted Duck and, occasionally, vagrant Green-winged Teal and Ring-necked Duck. The machair at Ardnave has Red-billed Chough and Twite, while Snow Buntings forage along the sandy shoreline.

Loch Indaal, a large sea loch with mud flats, beaches, rocky promontories and several piers, almost severs Islay in two. Greater Scaup are numerous along with smaller numbers of Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, Slavonian Grebe, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and Common Goldeneye. Rocky beaches and mud flats attract Purple Sandpiper, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit and Red Knot. The mud at Bridgend is one of the best areas for waders and we may



Greenland White-fronted Geese Photo: Jo Finn

locate uncommon birds for Islay including Pink-footed Goose, Pale-bellied Brent Goose, Red-breasted Merganser, Grey Plover and in some winters the Icelandic race of Black-tailed Godwit. Near Bridgend the fast-flowing rivers attract Grey Wagtail and occasionally White-throated Dipper. A large freshwater loch often holds Little Grebe and the commoner ducks.

Woodland on Islay is generally stunted and old, attracting Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits, Eurasian Treecreeper and Goldcrest. In the open fields Fieldfare, Redwing, Mistle and Song Thrushes form large flocks before making the short migration across to Ireland.

In the south of Islay we visit the harbour at Port Ellen, which is sheltered from the worst of the elements. This is a reliable area for wintering Glaucous and Iceland Gulls although their numbers vary from year to year. The maltings around the coast attract Common Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer.

The Mull of Oa is close by. This RSPB reserve holds important populations of Golden Eagle and Red-billed Chough, while in recent years it has become a reliable site for the huge White-tailed Eagle.

Islay does have a good track record for rarities and we will look for these if they turn up during our stay.

Day 5: Today we take the morning ferry back to the mainland at Kennacraig and travel to Glasgow where the tour concludes.

Prices

Tour Price: £1395
Single room: £100
Deposit: £200

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation, meals, ferry fares, transport and guidance.

Not included: Accommodation and meals in Glasgow, insurance and items of a personal nature. Entry into RSPB reserves if you are a non-member.