

# 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 at Dunnet Head and the north coast 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



Red Kite Dale Hanson

## Dates

**TOUR A: Saturday April 27th – Saturday May 4th 2024**

**\*TOUR B: Sunday May 5th – Sunday May 12th 2024**

**TOUR C: Saturday April 26th – Saturday May 3rd 2025**

**\*TOUR D: Sunday May 4th – Sunday May 11th 2025**

Leader: Mark Finn

Group size: 7

Birds: 125–145

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

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.



Arctic Tern Jo Finn

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 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, and 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:** Today, we travel to Forsinard, located in the flow country of Sutherland, where we may encounter Hen Harrier, Short-eared Owl, European Golden Plover and Dunlin. On reaching the north coast we make a diversion to Sandside Bay for migrant waders and divers. 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. At the end of the day a visit to Dunnet Head the most northerly point in mainland Britain where we can study Common Guillemot, Razorbill, and Atlantic



**Red Grouse** Jo Finn

Puffin on the cliffs. Around the lighthouse Great and Arctic Skuas are regularly observed. Travel to Dunnet for the night.

**Day 5:** A change of scenery today as we head east into Sutherland and the Hope Valley a reliable area for Golden Eagle, Eurasian Woodcock and in some years Redwing. Loch Eriboll is a large sea loch holding Great Northern and Red-throated Divers in summer plumage and, on recent tours, White-billed Diver. Durness is the most north-westerly village in mainland Britain. 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 seen in recent years. Our journey takes us southwards past lochs with Black-throated Diver. Depending on bird sightings a visit to Ullapool which has a reputation of attracting Glaucous and Iceland Gulls in the spring. An alternative is to go towards Lairg on a very remote road passing through mountains and numerous lochs. This is

truly wild country and regular sightings of Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier and Merlin are possible. Later in the day we return to the Black Isle.

**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



**Red-throated Diver** Jo Finn

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.

## Prices

Tour Price A-B: £1,425 C-D: £1,450  
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.