

Autumn migrants on the edge of Europe

The Outer Hebrides, straddling the western coast of Scotland, is an area of outstanding natural beauty. This tour visits Lewis and Harris in the north and the southern islands of North and South Uist, Benbecula and Barra. Habitat ranges from the wind-lashed west coast to upland moors and bogs and, on the eastern seaboard, indented sea lochs. In recent years, the islands have built up a reputation for rare and unusual species. Extensive coverage of the islands has also revealed a rich vein of migrants and vagrants from North America. Anything can and does turn up on these remote islands. On recent tours we have found our clients White-billed Diver, Surf Scoter, Laughing and Bonaparte's Gulls, Grey and Red-necked Phalaropes, Snowy Owl, Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas and Red-rumped Swallow. If wind conditions are favourable, we can expect close views of Leach's Storm Petrel, Sabine's Gull and rare waterbirds from North America; Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher, American Coot, Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Duck have been seen regularly in recent years.

■ This tour starts and finishes in Inverness, which has good flight connections with the rest of Britain. Clients should book accommodation in Inverness on the night of September 14th. This can be combined with our Scottish Highlands autumn tour.

Day 1: Morning departure from Inverness, passing over Skye to Uig for a ferry crossing to Lochmaddy on North Uist. En route we make a short stop at Broadford Bay on Skye, which is one of the few areas with extensive areas of mud and grass islands. Waders may be numerous and we will be on the lookout for rare migrants which in recent years have included Little Stint and Curlew Sandpiper. The bay is also a regular stopping off point for Pale-bellied Brent Geese and overhead skeins of Pink-footed Geese heading east and south. As our journey passes through the mountains, it is possible to have views of both eagles and other raptors. On arrival in North Uist, we check Vallay Strand, a huge inter-tidal area, for waders and wildfowl and the possibility of American vagrants. Transfer to our base on Benbecula for four nights.

Days 2-3: The Uists have a range of habitats, from shallow lagoons, marshes, machair and dune systems to the open sea and sandy beaches. Our main interest is in locating migrants from Europe and North America. In recent years The Range and

Dates

Sunday September 15th – Saturday
September 21st 2024

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 8

Birds: 100–120

nearby Loch Bee have hosted Pectoral, Buff-breasted and White-rumped Sandpipers and Grey and Wilson's Phalaropes. On lochs and sheltered sea bays, we may find Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated Divers and a wide range of ducks including Long-tailed Duck, Greater Scaup and Common Goldeneye. The return passage of waders comprises Purple Sandpiper, Red Knot, Dunlin, Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone. On surrounding moors and high peaks, we have a chance of finding White-tailed and Golden Eagles, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier. Agricultural land holds Twite, Snow Bunting and, sometimes, Lapland Bunting. Rubha Ardvule is a noted seawatching point in



Ruddy Turnstone Jo Finn

westerly winds, providing close views of seabirds including Leach's Storm Petrel and, on occasions, Sooty Shearwater and Sabine's Gull. Various lochs may have Whooper Swan and other wildfowl, including American Wigeon and Ring-necked Duck in recent autumns. Stands of bushes may harbour migrants and occasional rarities. Loch Aynort has mature trees, a rare habitat on the lower islands. Careful searching in the right weather conditions may reveal the presence of Eurasian Wryneck, Spotted and European Pied Flycatchers, Willow Warbler, Blackcap, Goldcrest, Common Redpoll, Common Crossbill and the local races of Dunnock and Eurasian Wren.

Day 4: Today a day trip is planned to the island of Barra, which is the most southern of the Western Isles. In recent years the island has built up a reputation for attracting rare birds from North America and Asia. Any patch of bushes or trees are worth checking for regular migrants including Yellow-browed Warbler, European Pied and Red-breasted Flycatchers and, perhaps, European Turtle Dove and Wood Warbler. Rarities have included a Blyth's Reed Warbler in 2019. In addition to these species, Barra holds reasonable numbers of Golden and White-tailed Eagles, whilst the sheltered bays attract divers and seabirds.

Days 5-6: Travel to North Uist and cross the Sound of Harris into Lewis and Harris. Our main destination is the Butt of Lewis and its adjacent fields, lochs and scrub. Seabirds we may encounter from the 'Butt' include Manx and Sooty Shearwaters, European and Leach's Storm Petrels, Sabine's Gull, Great and Arctic Skuas and, possibly, Cory's and Great Shearwaters. Nearby fields sometimes attract vagrants including, in recent years, American Golden Plover, Pectoral and Buff-breasted Sandpipers and Ruff among the hundreds of European Golden Plovers. Passerines are few but may include migrant Snow and Lapland Buntings. The harbour at Stornoway attracts gulls and has the possibility of Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. To the north of the town a small freshwater reservoir attracts Long-tailed Duck, whilst offshore we have good chances of finding skuas and other seabirds in onshore winds. On the morning of Day 6 we check the grounds of Stornoway Castle for any recently arrived migrants. The remainder of the day is spent exploring sites along the exposed western shore of Lewis. Rare migrants are always possible; in recent years these have included Barred Warbler, Citrine Wagtail, Isabelline Shrike and Eurasian Wryneck. If the wind is blowing onshore, we have further opportunities to watch southbound seabirds from the Butt of Lewis.

Day 7: Morning ferry to Ullapool, sea-watching en route. Transfer to Inverness where the tour concludes later in the day.

Prices

Ground Price: £2,175

Single room: £ No Charge

Deposit: £250

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

Not included: insurance, drinks and items of a personal nature.