

# WESTERN ISLES

## BIRDING IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES AND ST KILDA



Pomarine Skua (Steve Duffield)

\*Sunday May 8th – Saturday May 14th 2011

\*Sunday September 25th – Friday September 30th 2011

Leaders: Mark Finn

Group Size: 8

Birds: 90-110

\*Please note the above tours can be combined with our Scottish Highlands spring tours on page 8 or our Highland Autumn tour on page 10

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 down to the southern islands of North and South Uist and Benbecula. 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 of Scotland. On recent tours we have found our clients White-billed Divers, Surf Scoter, Laughing Gull, Grey and Red-necked Phalaropes, Snowy Owl and Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas on our spring trips. During May we have set-aside two (optional) days in order to visit the remote archipelago of St Kilda which is approximately forty miles west of Lewis. This fascinating island was last occupied in 1930 and today it is owned by the National Trust for Scotland. The islands have the world's largest Northern Gannet colony plus thousands of other seabirds. During September the Western Isles offer some of the best seawatching in Europe. If wind conditions are favourable you can expect close views of Leach's Storm Petrel, Sabine's Gull and rare waterbirds from North America; American Coot, Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Duck have been seen regularly in recent years.

This holiday starts and finishes in Inverness which has excellent flight connections with the rest of Britain. Depending on weather conditions, the itineraries below may change.

On both tours you should arrive in Inverness the night before May 7 or September 24 and depart on the following day after the tour concludes. St Kilda is only offered in May due to weather conditions.

### SPRING

**Day 1:** Morning departure from Inverness, passing through Skye to catch the ferry from Uig to Lochmaddy in North Uist. On our arrival, we visit Loch Bee for Whooper Swan, Red-breasted Merganser and other wildfowl. In recent years, the area has recorded American Coot, Bonaparte's and Ring-billed Gulls. Transfer to Benbecula for three nights.

**Day 2:** Balranald is situated on the north-west coast of North Uist. The area is made up of crofts using traditional farming methods, thus ensuring a healthy population of Corncrakes from late April

and resident Corn Buntings. Lochs and marshes have Eurasian Teal, Gadwall and Tufted Duck. Nesting waders comprise Northern Lapwing, Common Redshank, Ringed Plover and Dunlin. Aird an Runair, close by, is an excellent sea-watching point particularly in spring when, in favourable weather conditions, Northern Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, European Storm and Leach's Storm Petrels and Pomarine Skuas pass offshore. Eurasian Dotterels are occasionally seen resting on the machair. Benbecula is situated between the two larger islands. From the coast road we should see a variety of species including Common Eider, Long-

tailed Duck and, in May, Common, Arctic and Little Terns along with harassing Arctic Skuas.

**Day 3:** Loch Druidibeg is our destination, a rather harsh landscape of shallow lagoons, marshes, and machair and dune systems. On the lagoons we should find Red and Black-throated Divers, Whooper Swan, Greylag Geese and a wide range of ducks. On surrounding moors we have a chance of finding Golden Eagle, Merlin, Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier. Agricultural land around the loch may have Common Redpoll, Twite and Corn Bunting. In the afternoon, a visit to an indented sea loch

with patches of woodland is planned. We have excellent chances of Golden and White-tailed Eagles and a range of passerines including Willow Warbler and endemic subspecies of Dunnock and Wren. Nearby on the Atlantic Ocean coast, sheltered bays and beaches with seaweed attract Pale-bellied Brent Geese and lingering Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, while shorebirds gather in huge concentrations.

**Day 4:** Today we head north crossing the Sound of Harris to Harris and Lewis. On arrival in Harris, we drive through the island's stark and dramatic scenery, checking a sea loch for Great Northern and Red-throated Divers, Common Scoters and, possibly, Surf Scoters. Our journey takes us to the Butt of Lewis for breeding seabirds and the possibility of White-billed Diver which has been annual in recent years. Loch Stiapavat is attractive to European Golden Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Ruff, Northern Shoveler and Garganey. Later, we transfer to Stornoway and check the harbour for Iceland and Glaucous Gulls and Purple Sandpipers. Three-night stop in Stornoway.

**Days 5-6:** These two days have been set aside for the optional day trip to St Kilda. (Please note if you decide not to visit St Kilda we have arranged a guide for the day). On the day we do not visit St Kilda we will go to Paicr and other areas of Lewis. Our journey starts from Lewis to St Kilda one of four islands making up the group (plus rock stacks). St Kilda has the most important and largest sea bird colonies in the Northeast Atlantic numbering over a million birds with thousands of Northern Gannet, Northern Fulmar, Common Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin, European Storm and Leach's Petrel, although the latter is rarely seen due to its nocturnal habits. We have three hours ashore to search for the endemic St Kilda Wren and any migrants which may be present. In recent years this has included Snowy and Long-eared Owls and Common Rosefinch. We

sail round the islands with their towering cliffs some of the highest in Britain rising to over 400 metres. To and from St Kilda we have excellent chances of observing Great and Arctic Skuas, Manx Shearwater and other seabirds.

**Day 7:** After breakfast we visit the grounds of Stornoway Castle, a habitat of woodland and gardens. Scarce birds of the Western Isles occur here – Grey Wagtail, Eurasian Treecreeper and Eurasian Siskin – as well as breeding migrants, notably Spotted Flycatcher and, in some years, Wood Warbler. Next on the agenda is Chicken Head and Braighe, the former being a regular haunt of divers and seabirds. Near Tiumpnan Head we should locate calling Corncrakes from the abundant hay meadows. In the early afternoon, we cross The Minch to Ullapool in Wester Ross. Seabirds we may encounter include Manx Shearwater, European Storm Petrel, auks, gulls and Great and Arctic Skuas. On arrival in Ullapool we transfer to Inverness where the tour concludes.

### AUTUMN

**Day 1:** Morning departure from Inverness passing over Skye to Uig for a ferry crossing to Lochmaddy in North Uist. On arrival we check Vallay Strand, a huge inter-tidal area, for waders and wildfowl and the possibility of American vagrants and Snowy Owls. Transfer to Benbecula for three 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 these have included 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, Common Knot, Dunlin, Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone. On surrounding moors and high peaks, we have a chance of finding White-tailed and Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier. Agricultural land holds Twite, Common Redpoll, Snow Bunting and, sometimes, Lapland Buntings. Rubha Ardvule is a noted seawatching point in westerly winds, providing close views of seabirds including Leach's Storm Petrel and, on occasions, Sooty Shearwater and Sabine's Gulls. Various lochs may have Whooper Swan and wildfowl including American Wigeon and Ring-necked Duck in recent autumns. Stands of bushes may harbour migrants and occasional rarities.

**Day 4:** 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, on occasions, Cory's and Great Shearwaters. Nearby fields sometimes attract vagrants including, in recent years, American Golden Plover and Pectoral and Buff-breasted Sandpipers. Passerines are few but may include migrant Lapland Buntings. Transfer to Stornoway for two nights.

**Day 5:** This morning we check the grounds of Stornoway Castle for any recently arrived migrants. We spend the remainder of the day exploring sites along the exposed western shore of Lewis. Rare migrants are always possible, in recent years this has included Isabelline Shrike and Eurasian Wryneck. If the wind is blowing onshore, we have further opportunities to watch south-bound seabirds from the Butt of Lewis.

**Day 6:** Morning ferry to Ullapool seawatching en route. Transfer to Inverness where the tour concludes later in the morning.

Tour Price (spring): £1275

Tour Price (autumn): £1095

Single Room £:130

Single Room £:110

Deposit: £150

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

**Not included:** insurance and items of a personal nature. Entry fees into RSPB and SNH Reserves if you are not a member. The boat trip to St Kilda is payable locally at a cost of \*£180 per person. Drinks purchased at hotels. (\*as of July 2010)

Good accommodation in the Western Isles with en-suite facilities. Transport by 9-seater minibus. Short to medium walks along mainly flat ground on roads, tracks and beaches. Stout footwear and waterproof clothing recommended.