

Autumn in the Highlands

Autumn birding 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 and Speyside. During your week, we visit the Cairngorm Mountains in search of Rock Ptarmigan and Snow Bunting. It is also an optimum time to visit Caledonian pine forests for Capercaillie and parties of Crested Tits. Other specialties which are easier to see in October include Black Grouse, Scottish and Parrot Crossbills and the first winter thrushes of the autumn. On the Moray Firth and North Sea coasts, the main arrival of geese and ducks starts along with good seabird passage in north/south easterly winds. If the former are blowing we expect Sooty Shearwaters, Great and Arctic Skuas and possibly rarer species in Pomarine Skua and Sabine's Gulls. Coastal scrub and bushes along the east coast often lure migrants at this time of the year.

Day 1: Arrive at our home situated on the Black Isle and overlooking the RSPB reserve of Udale Bay. Feeders have Eurasian Siskin and Eurasian Tree Sparrow while lingering migrants include Barn Swallow and Common Chiffchaff. Northern Wheatear, Eurasian Linnet, Twite and Yellowhammer occur on the entrance track. In Udale Bay we may find Slavonian Grebe and Greater Scaup. Charonry Point is an excellent viewing point for sea birds in the right wind conditions. If these are blowing, we may observe Great and Arctic Skuas, Common, Arctic and Sandwich Terns, Razorbill and Common Guillemot and the most northerly Bottle-nosed Dolphins in Britain.

Day 2: Wester Ross is our destination, an area of huge bays and low cliffs hugging the Atlantic Ocean. Before reaching the west coast, we visit Applecross, a remote village. Our main interest here is low-level Rock Ptarmigans which reside on the boulder fields. Further along the coast, a remote village has White-tailed Eagles. Gairloch and Rubha Reidh hug the rocky coastline of Wester Ross with the former holding concentrations of Black-throated Divers and other seabirds. Rubha Reidh is a noted sea-watching point and, if the winds are westerly, we expect a wide range of seabirds. Poolewe attracts waders at high tide including Greenshank. Further along the coast, fields regularly host Greylag Geese and Twite.

Dates

Sunday October 1st – Sunday
October 8th 2017

Leader: Mark Finn

Group size: 8

Birds: 120-140

Day 3: Today we visit Abernethy Forest, a reserve of Caledonian pines interspersed with lochs. Our main interest is to observe Capercaillie, a rare and declining species. In the pinewoods themselves we may encounter Woodcock, Coal and Crested Tits, Eurasian Treecreeper, Eurasian Bullfinch, and Scottish and Parrot Crossbills. Later in the day, we venture into the Cairngorm Mountains for Rock Ptarmigan, Red Grouse and Snow Bunting. A stop at the Ness Islands in Inverness is made for Goosander, Dipper and Grey Wagtail.

Day 4: A change of scenery today as we head to Caithness and visit Noss Head and Dunnet Bay, two migration hot-spots. At Noss Head, bushes and shrubs around the lighthouse are attractive to Ring Ouzel, Whinchat, Common Stonechat, Blackcap, Common Whitethroat, Willow Warbler and Pied and Spotted Flycatchers. Rarer migrants regularly appear including Wryneck, Bluethroat, Red-breasted Flycatcher and, perhaps, Yellow-browed Warbler. Dunnet Bay is further west attracting gulls which have included Mediterranean, Sabine's and Bonaparte's in



Rock Pipit Photo: Jo Latham

recent years. Within the bay we may see the first returning Common Scoters and Long-tailed Ducks. St John's Loch is a privately run nature reserve attracting wildfowl and terns. On our return south, we visit Embo and Loch Fleet for waders and wildfowl.

Day 5: Corrimony is our first stop today, a remote reserve of woodland and moors. Our main interest is in locating Black Grouse which finds a stronghold here. Near Dingwall we visit a private estate for Capercaillie and other woodland birds including Common and Scottish Crossbills and Lesser Redpoll. On our return to the Black Isle, a river complex may have Red Kite, Osprey and migrant shorebirds. Depending on tides, a visit to Udale Bay is planned where shorebirds occur including Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Knot and Dunlin. Pink-footed Geese, Eurasian Wigeon and Eurasian Teal numbers increase in October and attract hunting Peregrine Falcons.

Day 6: Today we travel to the coastal towns of Lossiemouth and Burghead in Moray.

Burghead Bay probably holds the largest concentration of seaducks in Britain. October sees good numbers of Long-tailed Ducks arriving to join Common and Velvet Scoters and, in recent years, Surf Scoters. Along the shore Arctic and Sandwich Terns may be present. The rocky foreshore at Burghead often has Purple Sandpiper. Lossiemouth is reliable for gulls, terns and waders including Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper and Greenshank. Loch Spynie, nearby, has waterbirds and migrant passerines and the possibility of Common Otters.

Day 7: We travel to Easter Ross and visit Portmahomack for Purple Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstone. Tarbatness is close-by, an important migration point. From the point we should see Red and Black-throated Divers, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Eider, Common Scoter and Long-tailed Duck. Stubble fields regularly attract Whooper Swans, migrant geese, Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. If winds are from an easterly direction, Sooty Shearwater, Great, Arctic and Pomarine Skuas and large numbers of auks occur. We end the day at Nigg Bay for Black and Bar-tailed Godwits, Common Knot and other wildfowl and waders.

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

Prices

Tour Price: £ 895
Deposit: £150

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