

Late winter birds of coast and highlands

The wild and dramatic scenery of the Scottish Highlands and the adjacent North Sea and Atlantic Ocean coasts offer some of the finest winter birding in Britain. You are visiting at the optimum time for concentrations of divers, sea ducks, geese and other wildfowl along the coast and inland lochs. In the forests and glens we have a chance of observing Capercaillie, Black Grouse and birds of prey. On beaches and exposed headlands, we can expect flocks of waders, finches and buntings. In early April it is also possible to witness the first spring arrivals of the year.

Day 1: Arrive at Cygnus House situated on the eastern half of the Black Isle, overlooking the RSPB Reserve of Udale Bay. Feeders in our garden are well stocked attracting Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Eurasian Siskin, Brambling and other common garden birds. The lower garden regularly has Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting. Further inland, on the extensive farmland of the Black Isle, we should encounter Red Kite. As dusk falls, we have an excellent chance of observing hunting Barn Owl.

Day 2: Udale Bay is situated in the Cromarty Firth, which is literally on our doorstep – an exceptional area for birds. The deeper water sections have Red-throated Diver, Slavonian Grebe, Red-breasted Merganser, Greater Scaup and Black Guillemot. The new reserve at Nigg Bay attracts thousands of geese and shorebirds including Eurasian Oystercatcher, Eurasian Curlew, Common Knot, Dunlin and Bar-tailed Godwit. Tarbatness is a long spit of land jutting into the North Sea. Fields attract geese, swans, finches and buntings and predatory Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. Off the coast, we should see divers, seaducks, auks and gulls. Loch Eye, on our return journey, is an important roosting site for Greylag and Pink-footed Geese and Whooper Swan.

Day 3: This morning we travel southwards into Speyside and Abernethy Forest. Species of interest include Great Spotted Woodpecker, Common, Scottish and Parrot

Dates

Sunday April 1st - Sunday April
8th 2018

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 7

Birds: 115-130

Crossbills, Crested and Coal Tits. With luck, we may encounter the rare and declining Capercaillie along forest trails. Later in the day, we head towards the Cairngorm Mountains where we have a chance of locating Red Grouse, Rock Ptarmigan and parties of Snow Buntings at low levels. Depending on weather conditions, it is also possible to observe Ring Ouzels at lower levels of the mountains. Ospreys should be present at Loch Garten after spending the winter in Africa.

Day 4: Sutherland is a remote and rugged county located in northern Scotland. Further north, the sea off Embo hosts divers, grebes and Long-tailed Ducks. Exposed rocks have Ruddy Turnstone, Purple Sandpiper and Rock Pipit. Loch Fleet is almost separated from the North Sea, offering a sheltered haven for dabbling ducks and waders. Brora is a regular haunt of Little Gulls. Further north in Caithness around the towns of Wick and Thurso, we search for Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. Dunnet Bay and St John's Loch regularly have divers and seaducks. Rarities in recent years have been Ring-necked Duck, American Wigeon, Ivory and



Whooper Swans Photo: Jo Latham

Bonaparte's Gulls. We end the day at a new reserve for roosting Greenland White-fronted Geese, Whooper Swan, Hen Harrier and an outside chance of Short-eared Owl.

Day 5: Gruinart Bay and Little Loch Broom are our destinations today. Travelling through the countryside, we pass fast-flowing rivers and dramatic mountain ranges to reach the heavily indented coastline of Wester Ross. Loch Ewe often has White-tailed and Golden Eagles whilst the sheep fields attract flocks of Northern Lapwings and European Golden Plovers. We have excellent chances of locating Red-throated, Black-throated, Great Northern and, possibly, White-billed Divers. Other species present include Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Common Guillemot and Razorbill. Passerines are few but may include Lesser Redpoll and Twite.

Day 6: Loch Flemington is situated east of Inverness. Although small in size, it is a reliable spot for Tufted Duck, Common Goldeneye and rarer species such as Smew. As we pass through the town of Forres, Bohemian Waxwings are a distinct possibility. Further east, we visit Burghead Bay, arguably the best site for concentrations of seaducks in Britain. We can expect Common, Velvet and occasional Surf Scoters and King Eiders. Long-tailed Duck numbers may reach 5,000 birds. In Lossiemouth, we head towards the beach for wintering Snow Buntings and occasional Lapland Buntings. If time permits, we

visit a privately owned loch near Lossiemouth for grebes and ducks.

Day 7: We start the day by visiting a Black Grouse lek at Corrimony. Chanonry Point on the Black Isle is a noted area for seabirds and Bottle-nosed Dolphins, the latter a speciality of the Moray Firth. Later, we visit a wide range of localities in the Inverness area. The city itself regularly has Goosander, Grey Wagtail and Dipper. On nearby moors, we may find Northern Shrike and Common Stonechat. Wildfowl congregate in the Moray Firth and may include Pale-bellied Brent Goose, Greater Scaup and Green-winged Teal.

Day 8: After breakfast, the tour concludes with a visit to the Fairy Glen, a reserve of woodland and burns.

Prices

Ground Price: £925
Deposit: £150

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, complimentary drinks at Cygnus House, complimentary transport and any boat fees.

Not included: insurance and items of a personal nature. Entry fees into RSPB reserves if you are not a member.