

HEATHERLEA SAMPLE ITINERARY

BIRDING IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS WITH WHISKY AND CULTURE



Day 1: Scenic drive to Nethy Bridge / Arrival at Mountview

This morning we enjoy breakfast together and time to get acquainted, then we will head to the unique and wonderful Abernethy Highland Games, which is close to our hotel in Nethy Bridge. An unforgettable spectacle and a genuine experience of Scotland at its traditional best. Enjoy dancing, piping and athletic competitions, see throwing events and of course the wonderful spectacle provided by the massed pipes and drums. The games also include entertainment and exhibits related to other aspects of Scottish and Gaelic culture, including a 10-mile foot race, refreshments and a variety of trade stands, often provided and manned by local people.

Upon arrival at the Mountview Hotel following the games, enjoy a welcome dinner and orientation. The garden at our hotel should give you a nice taste of the local birdlife with Robin, House Martin, Western Jackdaw and Rook all being seen on a regular basis. There are those tempting local scotches awaiting you at the bar following dinner.

Accommodation at the Mountview Hotel for seven nights.

Day 2: Abernethy Forest – Walking and Birding

Today we visit extensive pine forests, a habitat type that has existed here for close to 8,000 years. This ancient Caledonian forest is the largest natural woodland remaining in Britain, a true national heritage. It is a Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) reserve. Here we find a good number of songbirds, including Crested Tit and Scottish Crossbill, the latter being unique to Britain. A number of trails cross the reserve and we have the morning to walk and explore. We join British visitors most excited to see nesting Osprey, still a relatively rare

bird, though recovering, in Britain. In the 1950's, after an absence of nearly 50 years, Osprey returned from their winter home in Africa to breed at this location. There are a number of bird feeders set up at the visitor centre providing an excellent opportunity to get good views of the more commoner "backyard" birds such as Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Siskin and Robin.

In the afternoon we may visit a local moorland loch where breeding Black-throated (Arctic) Loon may still be feeding their chicks and Red Grouse meander through the heather. With the heather now being in bloom, the hills turn a glorious shade of purple and the scent of the flowers adds to an unforgettable atmosphere.

Day 3: Outer Hebrides Migration Sea trip

We travel north to Ullapool, perhaps seeing Raven and Hooded Crow on the way, to join the ferry to the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. The ferry is a large ship, with excellent viewing opportunities in all directions, perfect for birding, and we take both the outbound and return sailings to double our chances of migrant seabirds. Leaving port, Black Guillemot, Shag and any late terns are possible and entering the Minch and more open water, Fulmar, Gannet, Shag, Manx Shearwater, European Storm Petrel, Great and Arctic Skua and commoner auks become likely. Rarer possibilities include Balearic, Cory's or Great Shearwater, Leach's Petrel, Pomarine and Long-tailed Skua or perhaps storm driven Grey Phalarope or Sabine's Gull. The Minch has a superb reputation for cetaceans and on calm seas we have a better than average chance of seeing Minke Whale, Harbour Porpoise and dolphins with Risso's and Short-beaked Common Dolphin the most likely.

Day 4: Local Moors in search of Black Grouse / Classic Highland Birding and Scenic Walking

Enjoy an optional early morning outing to look for Black Grouse, another of Britain's displaying grouse, intermediate in size with a long, forked tail. The males gather in impressive numbers on known display grounds, known as a 'lek', often on the edge of woodland and moor. The lek is now finished, though birds still return to parade and hopefully attract a female.

After this outing and our hearty breakfast we search locally for Scottish specials such as Crested Tit and Crossbills.

We enjoy a picnic lunch in the great outdoors and in the afternoon we visit moorland at a remote glen where we may see Golden Eagle, Peregrine, Merlin, Red Kite and Ring Ouzel, a member of the thrush family found in mountains and moorlands, Stonechat, Common Sandpiper and more. It's a lovely day, with spectacular scenery, and a good time to walk for those that enjoy it. Perhaps a celebration with a shot of Famous Grouse scotch will be in order this evening!

Day 5: Mountains and Whisky!

In Scotland you don't have to contend with high elevation to enjoy a taste of the arctic-alpine realm, as the highest peaks of the region, rounded and sculpted by time, reach just over 4,000 feet. We visit the southern end of the Cairngorm mountain range and take the chairlift up to around 3,000 feet to feast our eyes on mountain vistas with unforgettable scenery all

around. We walk the final stretch to the summit to reach the realm of the Ptarmigan and Mountain Hare and there will also be a show of alpine plants. More common species are present here too with Meadow Pipit and Northern Wheatear. There are 2,200 square miles of mountain wilderness here, and the geology is fascinating as well. It may be brisk up on the plateau so dress warm!

We will make a stop in the village of Braemar where you can explore the unique, independent shops selling local produce – everything from chocolate to haggis to gin! The main attraction this afternoon will be a tour of a whisky distillery to learn how the spirit is made before tasting the results!



Day 6: Scenic West Coast

We head north and west to explore more of Britain's 7000 miles of varied and beautiful coastline, exploring the rocky reaches where rivers flow straight to the sea. We will visit beautiful seaside places and villages including Gruinard Bay, Dundonnell, Little Loch Broom and Gairloch. Migrant shorebirds are heading south – we hope to see Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstone, European Golden Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover and more. Terns include Sandwich, Arctic and Common. We have very good chances of both Scotland's breeding Divers, Black-throated and beautiful Red-throated Diver. This is a great day for raptors too with both eagles (Golden and White-tailed) being possible along with Hen Harrier, Peregrine and Merlin.

Day 7: Moray Coast

Due north of our base is the Moray Firth which has a stunning coastline lined with quaint fishing villages, beautiful sandy beaches and a surplus of wildlife. We may look for concentrations of waders, including Bar and Black-tailed Godwit, Sanderling, Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot and Curlew. We'll have a look at some farmland too with species such as Corn Bunting, Grey Partridge and Yellowhammer high on our target list. If we are lucky we'll

come across the resident pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins along the way. Not to be missed is our visit to a local fish and chip shop for our lunch.

Day 8: Travel to Mull

After breakfast we travel to Mull, one of the most scenic islands of the Hebrides, its coast deeply indented and laced with scenic smaller rocks and islets. We travel via Fort William, crossing the Corran Ferry and driving through the area known as Morvern. Mull's geologic story tells of violent volcanic activity some 30,000 – 50,000 years ago when sequential lava flows accumulated to thicknesses of 6000 feet.

Mull is the second most mountainous island after Skye—its central tablelands reach over 3000 feet. Driving near the coast, we look for Harbor and Atlantic Grey Seals and European Otter. On arrival we visit picturesque Tobermory, the capital town of Mull known for its colourful buildings. Enjoy some time to explore before heading to our comfortable hotel for three nights.

Day 9: Iona and Mull

Mull is a wildlife paradise, becoming ever more popular with birdwatchers. It's easy to see why, with more eagles (both Golden and White-tailed) than anywhere else in Britain, Hen harrier, Short-eared Owl, Raven and a range of northern moorland birds. The coastal habitat is special and allows us to search for Great and Arctic Skua, Manx Shearwater, Great Northern Diver (Common Loon), Puffin, Gannet and much more, including a variety of waders. It is also a popular walking area, set in magnificent scenery, featuring towering cliffs, rugged mountains, rocky coastlines and beautiful pristine beaches.

On Iona, accessed by ferry from Mull, we look for Skylark and Twite (a Redpoll relative) and visit the Abbey, a Celtic treasure dating from the 5th century.



Day 10: Mull - Staffa boat trip

We enjoy a spectacular morning boat trip, visiting the Isle of Staffa, where we have enough time to visit Fingal's Cave, a unique geological phenomenon recognised as one of the

wonders of the natural world. We hope to find Twite, Meadow Pipit on the grassy tops of the island while European Shag and Great Cormorant linger on the rocky shore. From the boat we can hope to see Manx Shearwaters along with a few auks, Great Skua, Arctic Tern. This is an excellent opportunity to see Atlantic Grey Seals as they loaf on rocky islands, sometimes getting into the water to come and have a closer look at us! Minke Whale and Common Dolphin are also possible. This trip can be weather dependent, though it usually sails one of our two full days.

In the afternoon we take a drive round Mull's scenic coastline where European Otter is always a possibility as are White-tailed Eagles. Common Greenshank and Oystercatcher can usually be found on the tideline and we should get a look at some passerines such as Linnet, Mistle Thrush and Grey Wagtail.

Accommodation on Mull.



Day 11: Mull to Inverness

Today we bird and explore on Mull in the early morning and then cross by ferry to the Scottish mainland, returning to Inverness. This is a 4-5 hour drive in total, and we break it up with a picnic lunch and some geographic commentary en-route.

We enjoy a last dinner with our guide before settling into our accommodation.

Day 12: Departures

Our tour ends this morning after breakfast.