

HEATHERLEA SAMPLE ITINERARY

Scottish Highlands and Islands



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

Your Heatherlea guide will collect the group from Inverness in the morning. We then take a short drive to the impressive historic site of Culloden Battlefield. You will have time to take in the exhibits and walk through the field, a sobering but rewarding experience.

We then have about a one-hour drive today to reach the delightful Mountview Hotel in Nethy Bridge, our lodgings for the week ahead. A great plus to this trip is not having to keep on the move! En route to this perfect base, we make scenic and birding stops along the way and enjoy a picnic lunch.

Our hotel is in the Highlands, as we head south to it, we pass through open moorland with views of rolling mountains and woodlands. Upon arrival at the Mountview Hotel enjoy some free time to get settled before dinner and orientation. It's an easy wander down to the river or the nearby village of Nethy Bridge. Or there are those tempting local malt whiskies awaiting you at the bar...

Accommodation at the Mountview Hotel for seven nights.

Day 2: Strathspey local day

Our award-winning hotel is right in the middle of the best birding habitats, and a short drive should produce Black Grouse popping and cooing at the lek. After breakfast we head to nearby Abernethy Forest to look for Crested Tit and Scottish Crossbill in the forests, plus other local breeding birds and Red Squirrel.

Later we seek out secluded locations with Golden Eagle, Peregrine, Merlin, Red Kite, Ring Ouzel and Slavonian Grebe as our targets, and we may visit a number of moorland spots on this lovely day.

Day 3: West Coast

Today we head across the Highlands to the West Coast, where our key target is White-tailed Eagle. We have excellent chances of Golden Eagle too, and other western birds of interest are Hooded Crow, Twite and Cuckoo and on the sea Great Northern Diver and Black Guillemot in full breeding plumage. A frequent visitor can be White-billed Diver, and we will be paying attention to see if we can find one on your visit. Otter, seals and cetaceans may also be seen on this fantastic day amidst fabulous west coast scenery.

Day 4: Black Isle

The Black Isle to the north of Inverness is a great birding location, with the added advantage of being small enough to be explored in less than a full day. Red Kite are well-established now, and usually give excellent views and at Udale Bay the last remaining Wigeon and Teal will be joined by waders including Curlew, Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Ringed Plover, with perhaps Black-tailed Godwit, Turnstone, migrating Dunlin, Knot and maybe an unexpected rare wader too. Iceland and Glaucous Gulls might still be around, and we search favoured spots for Tree Sparrow, declining but still found here in a few places. For the rest of the day, we may visit favourite sites east of Inverness, to search for arriving Golden Plover, or rarity such as an American Wigeon or Green-winged Teal.

Day 5: Crown Estates and Royal Deeside

We go eastwards from Nethy Bridge to uncover some real delights. The Black Grouse lek here is a great start to our day, and we watch for breeding Goshawk and crossbills at nearby woods. Travelling through fields of waders we reach Royal Deeside to have a chance of Ptarmigan, Red Grouse and numerous Mountain Hare perhaps without any, or very little walking. Later we scan from viewpoints for raptors which might include Golden and White-tailed Eagle, Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Osprey and Red Kite among other species. On the Crown Estates at Glenlivet, we have exclusive access to secluded spots where you won't see many other birders, with further chances of Golden Eagle and perhaps Merlin too. The stunning surrounding scenery, less known among birders with Raven, Ring Ouzel and other moorland species all contribute to a truly special day.

Day 6: Cairngorm Mountain

We spend most of the day on the Cairngorm plateau, with unforgettable mountain scenery all around as we search for Ptarmigan and Dotterel. This day may be earlier or later in the week as we carefully choose the best time to visit for your comfort and safety, and of course we also take care not to disturb the birds. Look out also for Snow Bunting, Wheatear and Ring Ouzel as we enjoy brilliant birding in a very special habitat.

Day 7: Troup Head Boat Trip

We take an exciting cruise to the foot of Troup Head, mainland Scotland's only Gannetry, to see the nesting birds. Auks on the sea will include Puffin and Black Guillemot, and the first Great and Arctic Skuas of the season may be seen too. If we are very lucky, we may have an outside chance of White-billed Diver. A very exciting boat trip!

Birding along the Moray Coast is particularly enjoyable as newly arriving migrants complement the last few winter visitors. This day can easily include Osprey fishing, rafts of Common Eider, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, late-staying Common and Velvet Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Great Northern and Red-throated Diver, Glaucous and Iceland Gull, Sandwich, Common, Arctic and Little Tern and lots of spring waders including Purple Sandpiper, Turnstone, Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot, Sanderling and Dunlin, many of them in bright summer plumage. Farmland specialities including Corn Bunting, Yellowhammer and Grey Partridge are all still found on this fertile northern coastline too on this rewarding final day!



Day 8: Nethy Bridge to Orkney

We depart Nethy Bridge after breakfast, aiming to be on Orkney by mid-afternoon. Depending on recent sightings a couple of stops will be made on the way up. We take the ferry across the Pentland Firth, which offers us great views of the north coast of the Mainland and of Orkney as we arrive. These waters have a strong tidal current and offer rich fishing for birds and cetaceans alike. We can expect to see auks, Gannet, gulls, tern and perhaps a few Great Skua during the ferry journey. On arrival we will take time to visit the Stones of Stenness and Ring of Brodgar before we transfer to our hotel and settle in.

Day 9 & 10: Mainland to North Ronaldsay

After breakfast we transfer to Kirkwall Airport for our flight to the far-flung outpost of North Ronaldsay, a Heatherlea favorite, explored on this holiday for the first time during the breeding season. The short flight gives us a stunning view of all Orkney. Almost flat, with the

highest point being just 20 metres above sea-level, the island lends itself to great walking around the coast or along the good roads.

We search for late spring migrants, which at this time in previous years have included Paddyfield Warbler, Marsh Warbler, Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike, Citrine Wagtail and Common Rosefinch amongst commoner passage birds. With suitable weather, we should see Observatory staff ringing migrants and breeding birds. With the curiosity of the sheep dyke that encircles 90% of the coastline, keeping the sheep outside on the seaweed (too much grass is toxic to this rare breed), and several historical buildings and ruins, North Ronaldsay really has something for everyone. We stay here for two nights in the comfortable Observatory, returning to mainland Orkney on Tuesday. Overnight North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory.

Day 11: Flight from North Ronaldsay to Orkney Mainland & Ferry Trip to Rousay

After an early breakfast, we make our return flight to the Orkney Mainland. Once back on the mainland we take the short ferry hop over to Rousay. The second hilliest island after Hoy, its slopes are dominated by thick heather which is the perfect home for nesting raptors. On Rousay we visit Trumland RSPB Reserve, where we take a slow walk around the three-mile trail. The reserve here is home to Golden Plover, Merlin and Hen Harrier, with breeding terns and skuas on the maritime heath. For the archaeologists amongst us, there will be the option of a walk along to Taversoe Tuick, an unusual two-storied cairn. We will leave Rousay when we feel satisfied and finish the day on the mainland near the Broch of Gurness near Evie, where we will overlook the Eynhallow Sound, looking for Black Guillemot, Red-breasted Merganser and perhaps a late-staying Great Northern Diver. There will be time to look round the Broch itself if desired.

Day 12: Westray

The ferries allow us about six hours on Westray, with a 75-minute crossing each way. We take our minibus onboard to ensure we have sufficient time to take leisurely coastal walks at either end of the island. Westray is seldom visited by birders or indeed visitors to Orkney, but we will show you all the avian delights of this undiscovered gem! Westray is one of the best places in Orkney to catch up with Corncrake, and it has also a healthy breeding population of waders and seabirds. At Noup Head we take in the Gannetry (the only accessible colony on the islands), and other seabirds in a clifftop walk. This section of coast is one of the best for cetaceans in all Orkney, and we hope we get calm conditions to scan for Minke Whale, Dolphins and Porpoise, and perhaps something truly special, like a passing pod of Orca. If weather conditions allow, a cliff-top walk on this RSPB reserve is highly recommended. Another excursion will be a shorter walk at the Castle O'Burrian in the south-east corner where we hope to encounter Puffin and Twite!

Day 13: West Mainland

In the morning we will take in the isles of Burray and South Ronaldsay, with famous sites being the Italian Chapel (decorated with scrap materials by Italian prisoners of war in WW2) and the Churchill Barriers (causeways linking the islands).

We take a scenic drive down quiet lanes, using our bus as a mobile hide to get intimate views of waders and their chicks, and with luck Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owls on the moorland fringe. Taking in the RSPB reserves of Birsay Moors, The Loons and Marwick Head we will build up a healthy species list of breeding birds and hope to see rare breeders including Black-tailed Godwit, Pintail and Whooper Swan amongst the abundant common waders and wildfowl. At Marwick Head we will walk up to the Kitchener Memorial above the spectacular seabird colony where we will encounter good numbers of auks. If the tides allow, we will also take a walk around Brough Head looking at seabirds which should include confiding Puffins. In the afternoon we spend time visiting historical sites across Mainland, with unforgettable visits to Maes Howe chambered cairn and Skara Brae, two of the finest archaeological sites in NW Europe.

Day 14: Hoy

Today we visit the rugged island of Hoy, which has a totally different feel to the rest of Orkney. Taking the minibus on the ferry across Scapa Flow, we have around six hours to explore. If the weather allows, a walk out to the cliffs above the infamous seastack The Old Man of Hoy is well worth it, providing stunning views of the spectacular seacliffs of St John's Head too. Wildlife on the way might include Mountain Hare, Stonechat, Twite and we will definitely see Great Skua, perhaps closer than desired if we stray too near to one of the nests! The botany here is good too, with several orchids and other restricted range species. The walk is five miles return and is the longest of the week, with an altitudinal climb from Rackwick Bay of 300 ft (c.100m). We shall also explore the Rackwick Valley and admire the glacial features of this stunning landscape. We hope to add to our raptor sightings too, as these sheltered valleys hold several pairs of Hen Harrier and Merlin. In the last few years the return of the White-tailed and more recently Golden Eagle was been well publicised and with luck we may see them over the valley. A curiosity in the valley is the 5000-year-old archaeological remains of the rock-cut tomb called the Dwarfie Stane which the nimble can clamber into. If time allows we will take a look at the Scapa Flow Visitor Centre at Lyness, close to our ferry point, which mainly focuses on the strategic importance of the Scapa Flow throughout the two World Wars.



Day 15: Flight from Kirkwall, Orkney to Sumburgh, Shetland

We depart Orkney after breakfast, taking a short flight to Sumburgh, Shetland. After some introductory birding locally, we head north to our base on north Mainland where we stay for three nights.

Day 16: Fetlar

We drive through Yell and take the ferry to Fetlar, known locally as the Garden of Shetland for its relative fertility. We aim to spend at least 6 hours on this charming small island. We will have topped up our list with seabirds on the crossings and at the ferry terminals, but the main delights are on Fetlar itself. Here dainty Red-necked Phalarope can be seen at close quarters, and Red-throated Diver, Whimbrel, Golden Plover, Great Skua, Arctic Skua and Twite breed. We have a good chance of Otter along the shoreline too, and if time allows may explore Yell on the return journey.

Day 17: Hermaness, Unst

Today we visit Unst, the UK's most northerly inhabited island. At Hermaness NNR, a walk through the world's second-largest Great Skua colony takes us to the northernmost cliffs of the British Isles. From the 400ft high cliffs, we overlook the lighthouse of Muckle Flugga and around 140,000 breeding seabirds! Later we look for orchids and Edmondston's Chickweed (Shetland Mouse-ear), one of the world's rarest plants, endemic to Shetland. We will also visit a replica Viking longboat and longhouse, as well as taking in Britain's most northerly everything, from the famous bus-stop to the lesser-known village of Skaw – one of many great spots on Unst for migrant birds!

Day 18: North-west Mainland

Sites local to our accommodation have plenty of potential for wildlife while North Mainland's cliffs and bays offer some of the most spectacular scenery within the archipelago. We will plan to visit Urafirth, Hillswick, Ronas Hill, and Voe and the basalt cliffs at Eshaness, where the Atlantic Ocean hammers into the stunning, rugged coastline. We observe Red-throated Diver respectfully on their breeding lochs, nesting waders will be in great abundance and commoner passerines including Twite and Wheatear may be found on the clifftops. Scarce plants including Oysterplant can be found on a few beaches and higher ground is favoured by Mountain Hare. Sheltered Voes can be great for Otter, while Common and Grey Seal and cetaceans including Orca, Risso's Dolphin and Harbour Porpoise may also be encountered. A great day exploring one of the less visited corners of Shetland. Overnight Sumburgh for four nights.

Day 19: Central Mainland and Noss boat trip

We begin by exploring Scalloway, the former capital and home of the intrepid Shetland Bus operation, running covert missions to occupied Norway in the Second World War. Looking in at the freshwater lochs of Tingwall, we should see breeding Whooper Swan, wildfowl and waders in summer finery before arriving in Lerwick where a little free time will be planned to souvenir hunt, with the local knitwear high on the list! We then board our vessel and head northeast, past the coastline of Bressay and towards the sights and sounds of Noss National Nature Reserve. Noss is home to over 100,000 pairs of breeding seabirds. We sail close to the sandstone cliffs on the east side of the island which provide rocky ledges and nooks for

thousands of Gannet and Guillemot and hundreds of Kittiwake, Puffin, Razorbills, Black Guillemot and Shag, whilst the moorland interior is home to Bonxies and a few Arctic Skuas.

Day 20: Mainland and Mousa

Heading north across Mainland, we will spend a couple of hours exploring the remoter parts of Mainland, which have breeding Red-throated Divers, Whooper Swans and scarce breeders on inland lochs, and where outlying headlands are some of the best places to see Harbour Porpoise and occasional Dolphins, Minke Whale and Orca. These back roads will see us held up in Shetland traffic jams, with Shetland Ponies and Shetland Sheep slowing our progress along the single-track roads! We may also explore north east Mainland, a favoured Otter watching point, with numerous tern colonies and seal haulouts. Today we make a late evening visit to the Storm Petrel colony on Mousa, a spectacular sight and sound show!



Day 21: South Mainland

If the Mousa trip went ahead as planned, we will have a later start, and a relaxing day gently exploring the South Mainland, including a seawatch at Sumburgh Head where we will see Puffins and other seabirds at close quarters, and have a chance of seeing Minke Whale, Harbour Porpoise and cetaceans, with Orca possible at this time of year. Pool of Virkie, Quendale, Scatness or Quaff can be great sites for migrants while local freshwater and sea lochs should produce Red-throated Diver, bathing skuas, 'real' Rock Dove, Black Guillemot and Shetland Wren. We will also take several shorter walks around stunning sandy beaches and headlands, checking sites for migrant birds too.

Day 22: Return to Inverness

After breakfast and depending on flight times, we should have a few hours to explore South Mainland, visiting the superb tombolo of St Ninian's Isle and exploring the Jarlshof archaeological site. Your guide will transfer you to Sumburgh Airport, where you will say your goodbyes and depart on a short flight to Inverness where our tour ends. Transfers to hotel accommodation in Inverness.