

Heligoland: Autumn Migration in the German Bight

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Flight from London to Bremen/
Hamburg, train to Cuxhaven
-
- Day 2** Morning ferry to Heligoland then
afternoon birding
-
- Days 3 - 6** Birding on foot around Heligoland and
Düne
-
- Day 7** Birding Heligoland and late afternoon
ferry to Cuxhaven
-
- Day 8** Train to Bremen/Hamburg and flight to
London
-

Departs

September/October

Focus

Birding Tour – **Please note this tour is designed for the birders of all levels as we explore the island for unlikely species as well as twitching rare finds.**

Grading

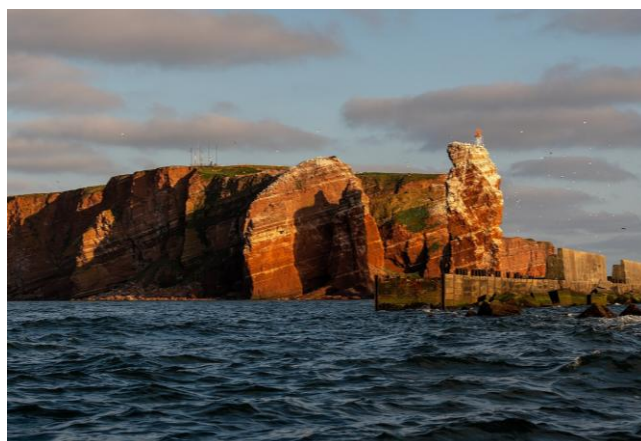
A/B – Daily walking. Expect uneven ground and a few hills.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code DEU04) or brochure

Highlights

- Spend a week in northern Europe's premier migration hotspot
- Highly sought-after eastern vagrants possible
- The chance of finding a truly rare bird!
- Excellent seabird passage in favourable winds
- Large Grey Seal colony
- Walking holiday, no driving involved
- Comfortable, stylish accommodation in a fascinating historic destination



From Top: Red-breasted Flycatcher, Heligoland, Sabine's Gull



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Heligoland



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Introduction

Heligoland is a small but exceptionally distinctive German archipelago lying in the German Bight of the North Sea, around 60 km off the mainland coast. It comprises the main island of Heligoland and the smaller, sandy island of Düne, separated by a narrow channel. Rising abruptly from surrounding shallow seas, Heligoland's isolation has shaped both its natural history and its long strategic importance to humans.

Geologically, Heligoland is unique within Germany. Its dramatic red cliffs are comprised primarily of Buntsandstein (Triassic red sandstone), material normally buried deep beneath northern Europe but exposed here due to salt-dome uplift and intensive marine erosion. The island is divided into the low-lying Unterland and the plateau-like Oberland, whose cliffs reach over 50 metres above sea level. Offshore erosion and storm events have steadily reduced the island's size over centuries, separating Düne from the main island in the early 18th century. The freestanding rock pillar Lange Anna is the island's most iconic landmark.

Human history on Heligoland is unusually complex for such a small place. Originally settled by Frisians, the island passed between Danish and British control before being transferred to Germany in 1890. Its strategic position led to heavy fortification in both World Wars, culminating in massive aerial bombardment during the Second World War. Post-war reconstruction reshaped much of the settlement, but the island later reinvented itself as a centre for tourism, marine research and nature conservation.

Despite its small area, Heligoland supports remarkably rich wildlife. The surrounding seas are among the most productive in the North Sea, supporting fish, crustaceans and marine mammals. Grey Seals breed on the beaches of Düne, now representing Germany's most important haul-out and pupping site for the species. The island's rocky reefs and submerged platforms host more than a thousand recorded marine species, many of them absent from nearby soft-sediment coasts. On land, vegetation is sparse but specialised, shaped by salt spray, wind exposure and thin soils. The real ecological distinction of Heligoland lies in its birds. The Lummenfelsen (Guillemot Cliff) is Germany's only true seabird cliff, hosting large breeding colonies of Guillemots, Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Fulmars and Northern Gannets. At peak season, the cliffs form one of the most impressive seabird spectacles anywhere in the southern North Sea.

Heligoland is internationally famous as one of Europe's most important bird migration hotspots. Its isolated position in the North Sea makes it a natural refuge for landbirds crossing between continental Europe and Scandinavia. In poor weather, especially fog, rain or headwinds, vast numbers of exhausted migrants are forced down onto the island, often in extraordinary concentrations.

Migration peaks occur in both spring and autumn. Autumn, especially September and October, is renowned for large falls of warblers, thrushes, flycatchers and finches, often accompanied by rare eastern vagrants from Siberia. Strong winds can also funnel pelagic species such as skuas and shearwaters close to shore, adding to the island's birding appeal. Even today, Heligoland remains a focal point for ornithologists studying migration, weather and ecology.

During the tour, we will visit the renowned Heligoland Bird Observatory where we may see bird ringing and recording taking place and see the place where the world-famous Heligoland Trap was invented.

Bird Migration Study on Heligoland

Heligoland has long held a unique place in the history of European ornithology. Positioned some 40 kilometres offshore, it lies directly beneath one of the great migration highways linking Scandinavia, continental Europe and Africa. For centuries, passing birds provided food for the island's inhabitants, particularly during spring and autumn when migrants were forced down by adverse weather. Yet it was this very concentration of exhausted travellers that also attracted the attention of naturalists, and gradually transformed Heligoland into one of the world's most important centres for the study of bird migration.

The modern story begins with Heinrich Gätke, a painter turned ornithologist who arrived on Heligoland in 1837. Initially interested in collecting specimens, Gätke soon began making careful observations, documenting the timing, abundance and diversity of migrants. Over more than 50 years, he amassed an extraordinary body of records, ultimately publishing his seminal work 'Die Vogelwarte Heligoland' in 1891. His observations revealed patterns of migration that were little understood at the time and established the island as a natural laboratory for ornithological research.

By the early 20th century, the shift from collecting birds to studying them scientifically was gaining pace. This transition was formalised in 1910 with the establishment of the Heligoland Bird Observatory under the direction of Hugo Weigold. One of the first institutions of its kind, the observatory pioneered systematic studies of migration through bird ringing, allowing scientists to track movements across continents. Heligoland thus became one of the earliest sites in the world where migration was studied using modern scientific methods, and it remains a key European ringing centre to this day.

Central to this work was the development of the famous Heligoland Trap. Introduced in the early decades of the 20th century and refined around 1920, the trap revolutionised the safe capture of birds for study. Unlike nets or spring devices used previously, the Heligoland Trap is a large, funnel-shaped structure of mesh or wire, sometimes reaching the scale of a small building. Birds, moving naturally along vegetation or guided by landscape features, enter the wide mouth of the funnel and are gently directed into a narrowing series of chambers from which they can be easily removed, ringed and released unharmed.

This ingenious design allowed large numbers of migrants, particularly passerines, to be caught with minimal stress, greatly improving both the efficiency and ethics of bird ringing. The concept proved so successful that variations of the Heligoland Trap were adopted at observatories across Europe and beyond, including on many British migration hotspots. In doing so, it played a pivotal role in shifting ornithology from a collecting-based discipline to one focused on conservation and migration ecology.

Today, Heligoland's birding legacy endures. More than a century of continuous study has revealed profound insights into migration routes, phenology and population changes. Yet for visiting birdwatchers, the island retains the same sense of anticipation that captivated Gätke: at any moment, winds may shift and the skies fill with migrants, continuing a spectacle that has shaped both the history of ornithology and our understanding of the natural world.

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the tour, though this will always be done to make the best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

London to Cuxhaven

Morning flight from London to Bremen or Hamburg. We then take the train to Cuxhaven, where we spend the night in a comfortable hotel with dinner at a local restaurant. Depending on flight and train times, there may be time for some afternoon birding on foot around Cuxhaven.

Day 2

Morning Ferry to Heligoland, Birding in the Afternoon



Thrush Nightingale

After breakfast in Cuxhaven, we will transfer to the pier to catch our onward passenger ferry to Heligoland. We may have time to do a little birding around the harbour mudflats, which is an excellent place to find our first waders and we may encounter a few early Brent Geese. The crossing across the open North Sea takes 1 1/4 hours and might be rough but we may see a few pelagic seabirds on the journey. Upon arrival on Heligoland's Hauptinsel, we will transfer to our island accommodation and check in. Later, we will take a short walk to familiarise ourselves with the

island's unique red cliffs. Flocks of Blackbirds and Song Thrushes often dominate the paths at this time of year, with Yellow-browed Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Goldcrests in any piece of cover. Already we may find Brambling feeding in the clifftop allotments or a Barred Warbler lingering in a garden.

Days 3-6

Birding Heligoland

There is no fixed itinerary for our stay on Heligoland. Each day will be spent walking out from our base, exploring the island's varied habitats and experiencing the thrill of migration. Efforts will be made to see any rarity that is found.

The Kurpark & Village Gardens

We will explore the dense bushes, allotments, and small gardens in the island's lower town of Unterland, a classic area for late-season migrants. Yellow-browed Warblers are usually present, while a Red-breasted Flycatcher or Red-backed Shrike might add colour to the hedges and fences. Buntings are a feature of autumn here, with Little and Rustic Buntings sometimes amongst flocks of Chaffinches and Bramblings. Scarcer species such as Dusky Warbler do turn up, but much of the pleasure comes from sifting through common migrants in the hope of a surprise. On such an open island, it will soon become apparent that even the tiniest patch of cover will be utilised by tired migrants.



Rough-legged Buzzard

Lummenfelsen & Northern Headlands



Common Eider

One day we will head to the island's northern cliffs for a sea-watch, scanning for late Sooty Shearwaters and skuas powering past offshore amongst the throng of Gannets, Fulmars and Kittiwakes. Harbour Porpoise and Grey Seals are eminently possible, with an outside chance of a cetacean. The headlands often hold Snow Buntings, while Turnstones and Purple Sandpipers forage along the rocky shoreline near the iconic Lange Anna stack. A walk through the clifftop bushes might reveal a Bluethroat or even an Olive-backed Pipit, neither guaranteed but always possible in the right conditions.

Düne Beaches & Central Ponds

A brief boat crossing brings us to the sandy sister island, Düne, with its beaches, dunes and freshwater pools. Merlins are regular autumn hunters here, and Whooper Swans, Barnacle Geese or Pink-footed Geese may drop onto the golf course ponds. Among the pipits, we'll look for something different: Citrine Wagtail or Richard's Pipit might be present amongst the throng of Meadow and Rock Pipits but finding one will require plenty of patience and careful observation. September is the prime time to find a Great Snipe and these chunky waders have been flushed from the marram grass by lucky birders in the past. The challenge will be to identify one amongst numerous Common Snipe, while the diminutive Jack Snipe will be less of a conundrum. Other waders will need to be carefully checked, as Golden Plover flocks may hold an American Golden Plover, or a rare sandpiper may feed unobtrusively amongst the more familiar Dunlin and Red Knots.

The Fanggarten & Mittelland

Other excellent sites include the historic Vogelwarte trapping garden and the sheltered Mittelland slopes, where sparrows are ever present and Snow Buntings might flutter over the paths, or Lapland Buntings might feed unobtrusively among them. With easterly winds, late warblers remain possible, and the dense, protected bushes are great places to look for them. The valleys often hold flocks of finches, and thrushes regularly drop in to rest. The Fanggarten is also the best place to witness the scientific ringing work that has made Heligoland famous.



Little Bunting

Revisiting Hotspots

Heligoland rewards persistence. A garden that was quiet early in the week may now hold a Red-flanked Bluetail or simply a fresh arrival of Robins, Goldcrests and Chiffchaffs. This constant turnover is what makes the island so addictive and every day feels new, even when the species are familiar. Like any migration hotspot, much depends on the weather. Any wind from north-east to south-east with a light shower might result in a memorable fall of migrants, while a persistent north-westerly or a clear day may see migrant habitat eerily quiet. However, Heligoland might produce something special even in seemingly unfavourable conditions, as overshooting Siberian passerines have been recorded on numerous occasions.

Day 7

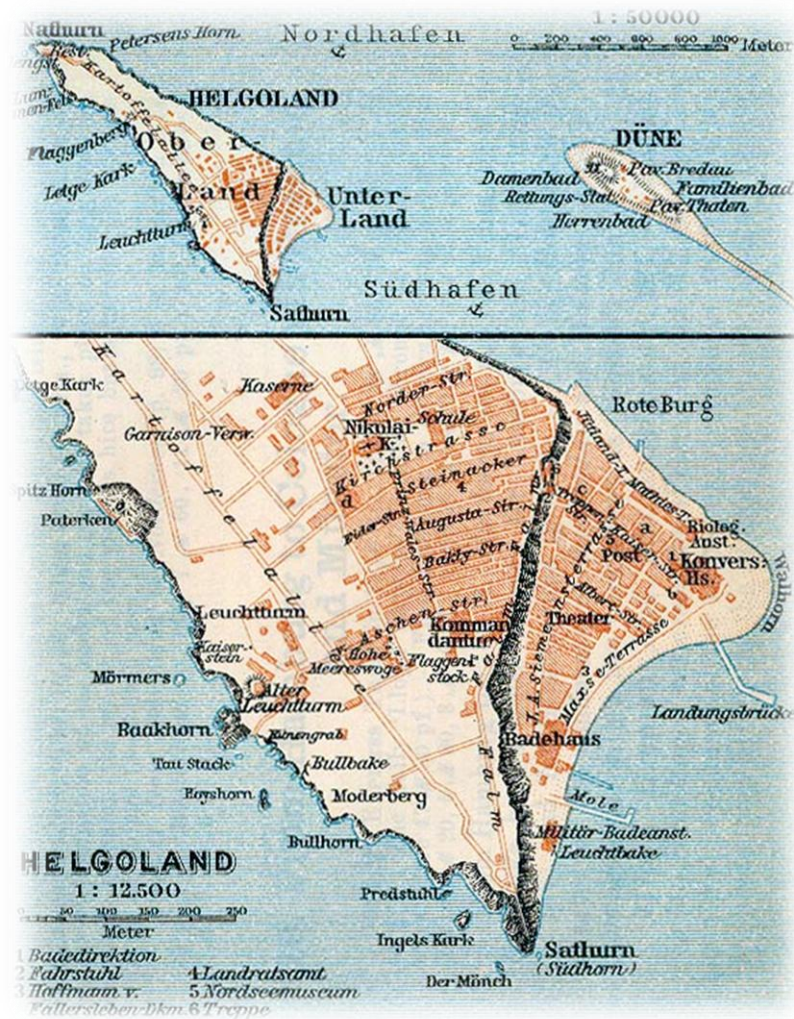
Ferry to Cuxhaven

After a final morning's birding the island, we will say goodbye to Heligoland and embark on our afternoon departure back to Cuxhaven, where we will spend the night. We will have the late afternoon free to bird sites and mudflats around town.

Day 8

Cuxhaven to London

We will take a train back to Bremen or Hamburg where we will catch our return flight to London.



Additional Information

Flights

Flights will be from a London airport to either Bremen or Hamburg.

Onward Travel

We will travel by train from the airport to the pleasant coastal town of Cuxhaven, where we will check into a good- quality hotel for the night. Depending on flight and train times there may be the opportunity for afternoon birding around the town. Dinner will be at a local restaurant.

The following morning we will take the 75-minute ferry journey to Heligoland arriving around lunchtime. We will check into the hotel and after lunch, take our fort walk around Heligoland

Transport

The joy of this holiday is that all days are spent on foot walking around the small island of Heligoland and its smaller neighbour Düne. There is no driving involved and all transport costs are included in the cost of the holiday.

Accommodation & Meals

All accommodation and breakfast are included in the cost of this tour: lunches and evening meals are not. Cafés will be used for lunch while on Heligoland. For dinner, there are several restaurant options and clients can choose themselves where to dine.

Clothing

Heligoland can be exposed, wet and windy, and your clothing should reflect this. Sturdy footwear is essential for the several walks involved. Warm clothing is essential, as is a hot water flask for coffee stops and walking poles are advised for those less able. Warm, waterproof clothing may be needed on board the ferry, too, for those who hope to spot wildlife from the deck.

Tour Grading

Grade A/B. Generally easy but all day on foot.

Extra Expenses

Lunches throughout and evening meals in Cuxhaven are not included. Extra expenditure of a personal nature, such as drinks and snacks, is also not included in the cost of this tour.

Important Considerations – Weather & Travel

Heligoland is a remote and isolated island in the North Sea which can present challenges with travel. Ferry delays and cancellations due to high winds may occur and clients should ensure that they have comprehensive travel insurance for expenses incurred due to such eventualities.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk or, alternatively, complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room or ferry supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please do call us on 01962 733051, or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.



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