

Wildlife of North & South Uist - The Outer Hebrides....In Style!

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Inverness to Skye. Ferry to North Uist

Day 2-7 Benbecula, North and South Uists

Day 8 Ferry to Skye and transfer to Inverness

Departs

May

Focus

Birds and mammals

Grading

A

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR21) or brochure

Highlights

- Drives & easy-paced wildlife walks on North & South Uist, plus Benbecula
- Look for Otter, seals & Red Deer
- Golden Eagles, Hen Harrier, Merlin & Short-eared Owl
- Divers in breeding plumage on the lochs
- Corncrakes & many breeding waders
- Boat trip to view fishing White-tailed Eagles
- A 7-night single-centre stay in one of the best hotels on the islands



Hen Harrier (Paul Marshall)



Corncrake (Ainars Aunins)



Common Seal (Dave Pierce)



Introduction

North Uist, South Uist and Benbecula together comprise the wild and beautiful southern islands of the Outer Hebrides and on this 8-day holiday we will explore their fabulous mountain, 'machair' and lakeland habitats in search of breeding raptors and waders, as well as looking offshore for passage seabirds. We begin in the Scottish Highlands at Inverness before driving through increasingly remote countryside to the Isle of Skye and on to the ferry terminal at Uig, from where we take the ferry crossing of just under two hours to Lochmaddy on North Uist.

We will get our first taste of these wild and beautiful islands after checking in to our hotel on the outskirts of Lochmaddy where we will be based for our week-long stay. Our accommodation is considered to be the best in North Uist with comfortable rooms and excellent cuisine based on local produce. Otters and Red Deer can be seen on the island and we'll venture to north and south as we explore the islands' lochs and machair (a green sward habitat rich in colourful wild flowers), as well as white shell-sand beaches and windblown landscapes.



Otter (Dani Free)



Twite (Stewart Woolley)

The coastline and lochs of South Uist support breeding waterfowl and waders such as Red-breasted Merganser, Eider, Snipe, Dunlin, Greenshank, Redshank and Golden Plover. The Uists represent one of the Corncrake's strongholds in the British Isles; this secretive species can be heard calling persistently day and night and with some luck seen. Eagles are a definite highlight, with both Golden and White-tailed likely. Whilst other breeding raptors including Hen Harrier, Buzzard, Peregrine, Merlin and Short-eared Owl. There's also the chance of seeing three species of diver – Black-throated,

Great Northern and Red-throated; at this time of year they should all be in full breeding plumage. Twite, though disappearing from many mainland areas in Britain, are common on the islands. There are mammals here too, and we'll search the sea-lochs and inlets for Otters, and both Grey and Common Seals.

This holiday also offers a view of a rural environment which, on mainland Britain, belongs strictly to the past. Standing stones, cairns, and a vibrant Gaelic culture provide a rich cultural ingredient to this destination of lochs, mountains and dazzlingly white beaches, while the sighting of a rare Snowy Owl or early Red-necked Phalarope may add final icing to the cake!

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme

during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Itinerary

Day 1

Inverness to North Uist

We'll depart from Inverness this morning aboard our tour minibus for the three-hour journey to the Isle of Skye making a stop or two for comfort breaks and lunch en-route. We will arrive in the early afternoon at the port of Uig where we may have time to scan the bay for divers and Black Guillemot before boarding



Manx Shearwater (Dave Shute)

the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry* bound for Lochmaddy on North Uist. During the two-hour crossing we should encounter our first seabirds including Manx Shearwater, Fulmar, Gannet, auks and skuas and even possibly a White-tailed Eagle.

As we enter the bay at Lochmaddy, we will keep our eyes peeled for skuas, eagles and Red-throated divers which can often be seen here. Having disembarked, we will then drive the short distance to our base for our 7-night stay on the outskirts of Lochmaddy.

After checking-in we should have time for a short excursion to the nearby coast. We will return in good time to freshen-up before dinner.

Days 2 – 7

Benbecula, North Uist & South Uist

We'll make a thorough exploration of North Uist, South Uist and Benbecula, our exact itinerary depending on the wildlife and weather conditions at the time of our visit. These islands, especially South Uist, have some remarkable ecological features. Like much of north and west Scotland, the underlying rocks are mainly igneous and metamorphic – acid rocks giving rise to poor soils and oligotrophic lochs. However, blown-shell sand has greatly sweetened the lochs on the west side of South Uist and here you find great numbers of waterfowl. The same blown-shell sand creates the 'machair', the rich green sward found at the head of many bays on the west side of Scotland.



Corn Bunting (Derek Mills)



Red-throated Diver (Alan Bevis)

As a result, the lochs of South Uist are rich in common waterbirds. By contrast, in North Uist the lochs are more sterile, and it is here especially that we hope to see both Black-throated and Red-throated Divers. We will hear Corncrakes calling in many places and, with diligence and patience, hope to get good views of this elusive bird.

The variety of mammals found on the islands is small but we will search sea-lochs and inlets

looking for Otter, and we should see Grey and Common Seals.

We'll find time to do some sea-watching from various headlands, especially Rubha Ardvule, where various seabirds are possible. If the winds are blowing from the west then there is every chance of witnessing skua passage. The Western Isles are famous for the spring passage of the two rarer British skuas, Pomarine and Long-tailed, en route from wintering to breeding grounds in the Arctic. Mid May is the peak time for passage and views can be exceptional. By minor roads on this side of South Uist we'll be hoping to see Corn Bunting, a species sadly in extreme decline in much of Britain.



White-tailed Sea Eagle (Stewart Woolley)

The three main islands of our visit – South Uist, Benbecula, and North Uist – are joined by causeways which also link the minor tidal island of Grimsay. On one day we hope to make a boat trip from Grimsay where we will have a good chance of seeing White-tailed Eagles fishing in the sea loch. Please allow an additional £30 for this 2-hour cruise. We may also visit Eriskay, celebrated for its love songs, and as the location for Compton MacKenzie's 1947 novel, and subsequent film, 'Whisky Galore'. Lying about five miles west of North Uist, the Monach Islands are home to the largest group of Grey Seals in

the world, plus seabirds including terns and guillemot. An optional trip can be arranged to the islands whose flora, though not offering any notable rarities, is very attractive.

Day 8

North Uist to Inverness

Our ferry leaves from Lochmaddy in the early morning* and on arrival in Uig we will travel back through Skye and on to Inverness where the tour finishes in the early afternoon.

* Please note that times of ferries are subject to change, and exact timings vary according to weather and sea conditions. Exact times and details of crossings will be sent to you in your Final Joining Instructions nearer the time of departure.

Additional Information

Accommodation & Meals

We will be spending the week at the Hamersay House, a 4-star hotel on North Uist, close to some of the best habitats. All rooms are en-suite with double or twin-beds. Single-occupancy of a room is available on payment of the appropriate supplement.

Breakfasts and evening meals are included in the tour price, except for breakfast on Day 1 and the evening meal on the crossing on Day 8.

Please note: ***Lunches are not included in the tour cost*** and can either be purchased from the hotel (£8) on request the day before or at a local supermarket which we will stop at each morning. You may wish to bring a thermos flask for hot drinks during the day.

Extra expenses

Lunches (allow £8-10 per day), and expenditure of a personal nature such as drinks, laundry etc. and £30 for the 2-hour cruise at Grimsay.

Connections / Joining the Trip

The meeting place will be Inverness railway station on the early morning of Day 1 (time will be advised on the joining instructions) although for those travelling by car it would be possible to meet the group at the ferry terminal in Uig on the Isle of Skye.

Train

Virgin East Coast www.virgintrainseastcoast.com operate a daily service between London King's Cross and Inverness with their direct route taking approximately 8 hours. There are connections from other UK cities. You can check National Rail (08457 484950) www.nationalrail.co.uk nearer the time for precise train timings (usually 90 days before departure) and when making your booking we recommend that you request reserved seating on all journeys. In addition Caledonian Sleeper operate an overnight service from London to Inverness www.sleeper.scot/js/#/caledonian/fares

Car

There is secure parking very close to Inverness station at Rose Street multi-storey car park www.highland.gov.uk 8 days parking there is currently priced at £45. For anyone who wishes to make their own way by car to the Uig ferry terminal <https://www.calmac.co.uk/article/2311/Uig> there is plentiful unsecured parking there.

Air

There are several airlines (Easyjet, Flybe, British Airways etc) that operate direct flights to Inverness from London or further afield. You would need to travel the day before and meet at the station on Day 1.

For those who wish to join the tour in North Uist, Flybe operate direct flights from Glasgow to Benbecula from where you can make your own way to the hotel on North Uist and meet the group in the evening for dinner at the end of Day 1. The tour cost for this option would be reduced by the total of the return ferry journey that you would not require.

Accommodation in Inverness

There are many hotel/b&b options if you wish to stay in Inverness prior to, or following, the tour. We suggest searching here www.booking.com You can also check reviews here www.tripadvisor.com

Clothing

These are exposed windy islands and your clothing should reflect this. Please ensure you pack warm and waterproof clothing, including hats and gloves. We will be hoping for some sunny spring weather but it is wise to be prepared. Some sturdy, waterproof walking boots are also highly recommended.

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 supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please 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.



Image by Derek Mills