

Islay and Mull ... In Style

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Meet Glasgow; transfer Islay
Day 2/3	Excursions around Islay
Day 4	Transfer to Mull
Day 5/6	Excursions around Mull
Day 7	Transfer back to Glasgow via Oban

Departs

October or November

Focus

Birds, mammals and other wildlife

Grading

A. Easy day walks only.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR31) or brochure

Highlights:

- Spectacular scenery
- Raptors, including Golden and White-tailed Eagles
- The unforgettable sight of thousands of geese leaving their roost
- A chance to watch the charismatic European Otter
- Stunning scenery.
- Welcoming hotels in lovely locations



From top: White-tailed Eagle, European Otters & Ben More. Images courtesy of Shutterstock



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

The beautiful Inner Hebridean islands of Islay and Mull complement each other perfectly. On Islay, a varied landscape of mountains, open moorland, pastures, windswept lochans, and more gentle woods and farmland is home to a wealth of breeding birds, but even more wintering wildfowl, both sustaining a large number and variety of birds of prey. The mountains and moorlands of Mull, by contrast, are wild, rugged and unforgiving; the island's vast western sea lochs beloved of Otters, divers, grebes and sea duck. There is no more dramatic time to visit than in late October or early November... when glorious autumn colours are at their best, vast numbers of wildfowl and winter storms move in, enhancing skies and landscapes. For birds of prey – their numbers enhanced by summer youngsters – and other predators, the hunt begins in earnest!



We begin with a 3-night stay on Islay, a remarkable haven for birds that is invaded each October by vast numbers of wildfowl which arrive from their Arctic breeding grounds to pass the winter amongst these lush grazing grounds. Amongst the most numerous of species are some 40,000 Barnacle Goose and 10,000 'Greenland' White-fronted Geese (the largest wintering population of this species anywhere in the world!). A dawn or dusk vigil at one of the goose roosts on the island is a humbling experience never to be forgotten, and amongst the vast flocks there is always the chance of finding something rarer, perhaps a Snow Goose or genuine Canada Goose from North America. Other wildfowl also occur, amongst them large numbers of Whooper Swans, Greylag Geese and ducks. Plenty of Great Northern Divers (often 50 or more) may be seen on the ferry crossing from Islay to the mainland, plus Black-throated and Red-throated Divers, Slavonian Grebes and many seabirds, including Black Guillemot. Ravens, Red-billed Chough, Snow Buntings and Twite may be amongst land-based highlights, but the stars of the show are most likely to be the island's remarkable variety of raptors – amongst them Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Peregrine and perhaps even a wandering White-tailed Eagle.

The superb single malt whiskies, which some argue are the finest in the world, are an added pleasure of Islay and, alongside the superb scenery, truly spectacular wildfowl gatherings and a host of other wildlife it's easy to see why Islay is one of our favourite UK destinations.

Mull, the third largest of the Hebridean islands, is perhaps the most spectacular. We reach it during a scenic day that includes travel by ferry, road and ferry. It is rugged, dramatic and blessed with extensive forests and moorlands, high craggy summits and a glorious coastline. Here the population of White-tailed Sea Eagles is as dense as anywhere else in Scotland, although there are even more pairs of the majestic Golden Eagle to



provide unique aerial comparisons. Many other birds of prey inhabit the island, including good numbers of Hen Harriers and Short-eared Owls. All three Diver species and Slavonian Grebes can be seen on the sea lochs that are the favourite home of Otters; indeed Mull must be one of the best places in Britain to observe these captivating creatures, and it is quite possible to see half a dozen or more in a day! The island is also well known for its Red Deer, which are numerous throughout, but there are also a few small herds of Fallow Deer, remnants from introductions made in the past. As on Islay, at many places around the scenic coastline, both Grey and Common Seals can be seen from the shore, often accompanied by Black Guillemots. Mull is certainly a magical island and, weather permitting, we'll savour it in many moods from our very comfortable base!

Itinerary

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.

Day 1

Arrive Glasgow, transfer Islay

We will meet for this holiday at Glasgow Central Railway Station at 1pm today. We will then drive for approx. 3 hours to Kennacraig, where we depart by ferry around 1800hrs for the two-hour crossing to Port Askaig on Islay. A feature of this tour is that it begins on a day of the week with a late ferry, allowing participants to travel from nearly every corner of the UK the same day, without needing to overnight en route.

We will be staying on Islay in the a very comfortable hotel, conveniently situated to allow us to easily travel to the different parts of the island. The hotel has comfortable rooms with en suite facilities and meals are served from a cosy restaurant, serving fantastic meals created from local produce. Inevitably the hotel bar offers a wide range of the famous Islay single malt whiskies and the staff are more than happy to educate you on the best way to enjoy these.

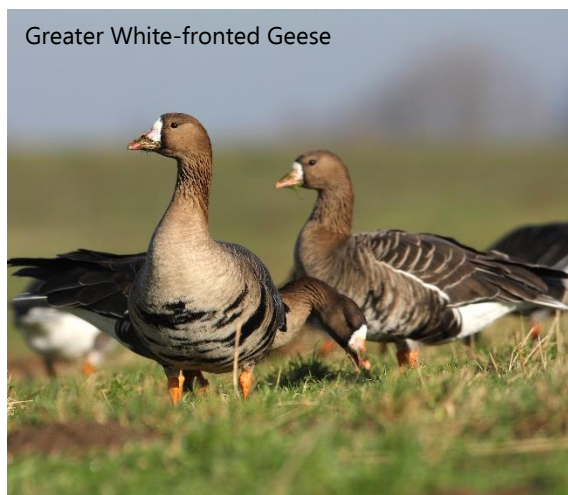
Day 2-3

Islay

We will spend both of these days exploring this diverse island, Islay is fertile compared with many of the Western Isles – it used to be called the “Queen of the Hebrides” – and this is reflected in the great numbers of geese wintering there. These islands are fine places for breeding birds in the summer; but it is from October that Islay truly comes into its own. During this month geese start to arrive in their tens of thousands from the north and by late October Islay is inundated with wildfowl. The most numerous species is the Barnacle Goose of the Greenland race, which has been known to number up to 40,000. This handsome cleanly-marked goose is a delight to watch, whether on the fields of the RSPB reserve at Loch Gruinart, the salt flats at the head of Loch Indaal, or gathering in their thousands at a night-time roost (or leaving at sunrise).



The Greenland White-fronted Goose is the next most numerous species. This goose – with its slip-slap black belly marks as though applied by a creosote brush – is less numerous than the Barnacle but nevertheless numbers up to 10,000. A particularly pleasant feature of Islay is that the two dominant species of geese do not necessarily feed in one huge concentration, as in some other goose wintering areas, but are widely distributed all over the island; indeed there are few corners



where you won't find at least a small flock of one or other species. Smaller numbers of Greylag Geese and the pale-bellied race of Brent Goose are also likely to be seen during our visit, the latter usually by the sea, whilst a few Pink-footed Geese occur, often manifested by the sighting of just the occasional solitary individual attached forlornly to a large flock of another species. Additionally, trans-Atlantic vagrants are regular, with the occasional Snow Goose having appeared in past winters (usually white phase birds, though blue phase have also been seen), and small numbers of 'truly wild' Canada Geese (both of smaller and larger races)

regular in most winters amongst the Barnacle Geese. We usually see five or six species of geese on this tour, and on one memorable visit we even managed seven!

Geese are not the only wildfowl to be seen on Islay. Goldeneye, Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Wigeon, Teal, Tufted Duck and Mallard are commonly observed, as are several hundred Scaup. Common Scoter are usually seen in small numbers and the odd Pintail and Shoveler may put in an appearance. Large numbers of Whooper Swans come in from the Arctic to winter on the island with the legions of geese, and Great Northern Divers are always present... and are especially likely to be seen on the return ferry crossing from which up to 50 may often be counted, with the odd Red-throated and Black-throated Diver usually amongst them.



The two long sea lochs, Loch Indaal and Loch Gruinart, are the winter home of large numbers of waders, both migratory and resident, with Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Knot, Redshank, Curlew, Lapwing and Oystercatcher being commonly seen. These areas attract hunting birds of prey such as Golden Eagle, Peregrine and Merlin, as do the south-west peninsulas of Islay which additionally usually yield Chough and large finch flocks, with Twite and Snow Buntings sometimes amongst them. Commoner raptors, such as Buzzard and Hen Harrier, may be observed in many parts of the island.

Islay is also a haven for mammals. Three species of deer are found on the island – Red, Roe and Fallow – and we usually manage to get good views of them although the last of these species can



be elusive. Both Common and Grey Seals are not uncommon and there is a stretch of road on Islay where, looking landward and seaward, we have seen all five of these animals. There can be few places in the British Isles where you can see five species of large mammals in as many miles! The Brown Hare is very numerous on Islay, and of a distinctive slightly reddish hue. Otters, however, are elusive. For this species we will wait until Mull, where Otters are numerous and relatively

easy to observe.

Day 4

Transfer from Islay to Mull

This morning we will leave Islay after an early breakfast, driving first back to Port Askaig, from where we will take the ferry back to Kennacraig on the Mull of Kintyre. Having the luxury of a ferry crossing in daylight this time, we will be on the look-out for seabirds and sea duck during our crossing. Guillemots, Razorbills, Puffins and Black Guillemots may all be seen, albeit all in their less spectacular winter plumages now. Gannets, Kittiwakes and Fulmars are likely to be patrolling the off-shore waves, perhaps joined by a late Arctic or Common Tern, or skua. The highlight of the voyage, however, is likely to be the large concentration of Great Northern Divers that occur here at this time of year, many of which may still be in their sporty summer plumage. Amongst them we will look for their smaller cousins, the Red-throated and Black-throated Diver.



Red-throated Diver

The 'coastal' drive north to Oban is a windy but spectacular one, and likely to take a couple of hours. We will then take an early afternoon ferry from Oban to Craignure on Mull. From there we will then travel to our comfortable hotel.

Day 5-6

Mull

Mull is a spectacularly rugged and picturesque island with a coastline that varies from towering sea cliffs to delightful sandy beaches and rocky kelp-covered shorelines beloved of Otters. Ben More is the largest of the island's hills and at over 3,000' qualifies as one of the 283 'Munros' in Scotland,



White-tailed Eagle

the focus for dedicated hill climbers from all around the world. From our hotel and surrounding areas we will admire its slopes from below as we scan upwards for Golden Eagles, Peregrines and Ravens. In particular we will be hoping for one of the highlights of Mull – a view of the magnificent White-tailed Eagle.

European Otter



This species has been very successfully re-introduced to Scotland and Mull is one of the best islands on which to see this huge bird soaring along the coastline or in the mountains. Often described as a 'flying barn-door', observing one of these birds plunge down and snatch a fish from the sea is an unforgettable sight. More often, however, they are to be seen scouring the hills and coastline for carrion from on high, always on the look-out for the remains of a seal or deer. Like their cousins, the resident

Golden Eagles, they are constantly mobbed by the island's Hooded Crows and Ravens and sometimes also incur the wrath of a Hen Harrier or Peregrine resulting in a thrilling aerial tussle.

On this tour we will be focusing particularly on the sea lochs and shoreline. All three divers may be seen on the former, with Great Northern Diver particularly common at this time of year. They, and the Slavonian Grebes that are also found on the sea lochs are likely to be sporting a range of plumages at this season, from startling summer to somber winter dress. Red-breasted Mergansers are also common, and may be joined by such species as Black Guillemot and Shags. The same sea lochs are also home to a large population of Otters, whilst both Mountain Hare and Red Deer, which range from the shoreline to the highest ridges, may also be seen. One generally requires a degree of luck to see Otters, but on Mull, provided the weather is reasonable, they are more easily spotted than anywhere else – usually from coastal roads.

We will make our exploration of Mull by means of two day excursions that take in some of the most spectacular scenery and interesting habitats around the island, ever vigilant, not just for Otters and other mammals, but also for the island's raptor species, which include both species of eagle, Merlin, Peregrine, Common Buzzard, Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl. We will also look for wintering waders on tidal mudflats, flocks of Greylags, other geese and wild Whooper Swans on coastal pastureland, and inspect swift-flowing streams for Dippers and Grey Wagtails. In the woodland and forest areas we will listen for Crossbills, Siskins and Redpolls, and look out for incoming Bramblings, Redwings and Fieldfares arriving for the winter.



Short-eared Owl

Another of the highlights at this time of year is the magnificent spectacle of autumn colours – the golds, browns, purples and yellows of the bracken, heather, beeches, birches and larches, often highlighted by a magical autumn light, offering exceptional beauty. We may also hear or witness the rutting of the Red Deer amongst these spectacular landscapes at this time of year.

Day 7

Depart Mull, transfer to Glasgow via Oban

We must leave our lovely hotel this morning after breakfast. It's an hour's drive back to Craignure, a further hour's ferry crossing from there to Oban, on the mainland, then a 3-hour drive back to Glasgow – a long day perhaps, but incorporating wonderful scenery. We should be back at Glasgow Central Station by 1600hrs, time enough for you to catch your return buses, flights and trains home.

Tour grading

Grade A. We will undertake some gentle wildlife walks during the course of the holiday (with any more demanding walks always being optional). However, our activities will be weather dependant – much of the wildlife on this tour being best observed from either our vehicle or a bird hide, both of which will be invaluable should we have rain or other adverse weather. On much of this tour we will simply spend our time 'looking' and enjoying avian, and some mammalian, spectacles.

Arrival / departure details

We anticipate that the majority of the group will by train into Glasgow. Over the last few years, access to the city centre for private vehicles has been greatly reduced, so we would ask those travelling by train to take a short journey out of the city to Paisley Gilmour Street Station, where your leader(s) will meet you. There are numerous trains between Glasgow Central and Paisley Gilmour Street, and the journey can be added to most rail tickets for no/little additional cost if requested at the time of booking. We will then pick any other group members up from Glasgow Airport before travelling to catch our ferry. Exact timings will be confirmed in the tour final joining instructions, but are likely to be as follows: 1310 hours at Paisley Gilmour Street Station and 1320 hours at Glasgow Airport. At the end of the tour we expect to return to Glasgow Airport by 1530 hours and Paisley Gilmour Street by 1540 hours. Those departing by air or rail from Glasgow should arrange flights or trains to depart after these times. As flight and train timings do vary from year to year, we would ask you to contact the Naturetrek office before booking travel arrangements that are unlikely to fit in with the timings mentioned above.

By Train

We meet you at Paisley Gilmour Street Station at 1315hrs at the beginning of the trip (further details will be given in joining instructions sent before the tour) Do not worry if our bus is a few minutes late, parking is difficult in the station and it is easier for us if we are sure everyone is together. Unfortunately, because of the afternoon timetable it is regretted that we cannot wait beyond 1315. At the end of the trip, we normally have you back at the station by 1600hrs. Most trains from the south come into Central Station and there are numerous connections from here to Paisley Gilmour Street. If you arrive at Queen Street Station, there is a shuttle bus which runs regularly to Central Station, or you could take the airport bus and meet the group there instead.

By Bus

If you arrive by bus at Buchanan Bus Station, you can either take the airport bus from there, getting off at the airport or Central Station; or walk the short distance to Queen Street Rail Station, and get the shuttle bus to Central, mentioned above. (Passengers without a train ticket will be charged for this journey) This shuttle bus, incidentally, leaves from the West George Street side - that is, south side - of Queen Street Station. There are regular connections from Central Station to Paisley Gilmour Street, where the leader(s) will meet the group.

By Air

We can meet you at Glasgow Airport at 1320hrs; please make your way to the dropping off point at the front of the airport terminal. The vehicle will normally pull into area B or C.

You can also fly to Islay from Glasgow if you wish, however there are no scheduled flights to or from Mull.

By Car

If you come by car, you may drive directly to the ferry terminal at Kennacraig. Clients have left their cars there in the past with little trouble. However, if you prefer more security, we suggest you may spend the night before your trip at the Stonefield Castle Hotel, a beautiful hotel situated in extensive and attractive grounds. (This hotel will normally let you leave your car with them for the week if you stay a night with them - but check when you book.) Stonefield Castle Hotel lies a little north of Kennacraig; we would normally meet you there about 1600hrs on the first day of the trip. Telephone: 01880 820836. www.bespokehotels.com/stonefieldcastle. You would then need to drive your vehicle to Oban on the transfer day, rejoining the group for the crossing to Mull.

In Glasgow secure overnight parking is available at Cambridge Street car park, about 10-15min walk from Central Station. For weekly parking we suggest that you contact the car park to get information on the best available rate- 0141 276 1830 or carparkinfo@cityparkingglasgow.co.uk. Information is also available on the website www.cityparkingglasgow.co.uk. Alternatively, you may wish to use one of the car parks at the airport and meet the group there.

If you have sufficient time in Glasgow, you may wish to visit the Burrell Collection a magnificent assemblage of paintings, sculpture, furniture, tapestries, ceramics and other items of interest and beauty from three continents. It is easily reached by train from Central Station and alighting at Pollockshaws West. Even before the opening of the Burrell, Kelvinside Art Gallery was recognised as one of the finest municipal (as opposed to national) art galleries in Europe.

Accommodation in Glasgow

If you arrive the night before the trip, or want to stay the night at the end of your trip, then we suggest the following hotels:

Convenient for city centre (5 min walk away):

Rennie Mackintosh Station Hotel

59 Union Street, Glasgow, G1 3RB

0141 221 0050 www.rmghotels.com

Premier Inn City Centre – St Enoch Square or George Square

St Enoch Square, Glasgow, G1 4AZ/ 187 George St, Glasgow, G1 1YU

0330 175 9007/ 0330 777 7294 www.premierinn.com

Radisson SAS Hotel

301 Argyle Street, Glasgow, G2 8DL

0141 204 3333 www.radissonblu.co.uk/hotel-glasgow

If you would prefer smaller, boutique-style accommodation then we suggest the following, which are situated about 1½ miles from the city centre:

The Flower House

33 St Vincent Crescent, Glasgow, G3 8NG

0141 204 2846 <http://theflowerhouse.net/>

Alamo Guest House

46 Gray Street, Glasgow G3 7SE,

0141 339 2395 www.alamoguesthouse.com

Alternatively take a look at options on www.tripadvisor.co.uk

Food & accommodation

Accommodation, breakfast and evening meals are included in the price of this two-centre holiday, but lunches are additional. For the first three nights we will be based at a very comfortable hotel on Islay. It will be a smaller hotel with less than 15 rooms, but each is comfortable and en-suite. Situated centrally on Islay, it's an excellent location from which to explore 'The Queen of the Hebrides'. For the last three nights we will stay in a comfortable hotel on Mull. Both hotels serve tasty meals that often showcase local ingredients. All rooms have private facilities.

Weather

At this time of year, the weather can range from moderately warm sunshine to wet and windy. We may get very mixed conditions on the same day! You should therefore bring a mixture of clothing including warm fleeces, jackets, hats and gloves. Walking boots, or good waterproof walking shoes, would be useful for some of the walks.

Equipment to bring

This is a list of suggested items that would help you get the most out of the tour:

- Hiking boots
- Cold weather and wet weather clothing layers, including waterproof jacket & trousers
- Warm hat and gloves
- Thermos flask and water bottle
- Walking poles if required
- Day pack
- Binoculars
- Camera
- Telescope (if you have one)
- Guide books for birds and mammals

Inclusions/ Exclusions

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- Accommodation in comfortable hotels on DBB basis
- Transport from Glasgow
- All guiding
- Ferry tickets

The following costs are **not** included and should be budgeted for:

- Lunches
- Drinks
- Discretionary tipping
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs

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.

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