

The Best of Scotland

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Meet Edinburgh; transfer Mull
Day 2/4	Excursions around Mull
Day 5	Transfer to Cairngorms
Day 6/7	Excursions around Cairngorms
Day 8	Transfer back to Edinburgh
Day 9	Depart Edinburgh

Departs

May or June

Focus

Birds and other natural history

Grading

A/B. Easy to moderate day walks only.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR62) or brochure

Highlights:

- Explore the wonderful Isle of Mull.
- Raptors, including Golden and White-tailed Eagles.
- Seabird colonies with Puffin, Razorbill & Guillemots.
- Highland specialities may include Ptarmigan & Dotterel.
- Spectacular scenery throughout.
- Mammals such as Badger, Pine Marten & Red Squirrel.



From top: White-tailed Eagle, Crested Tit & Razorbill. (Images courtesy of Shutterstock)



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Introduction

When thinking about a birdwatching tour to Scotland one question you may be asking yourself is "Where do I start?" or "How should I best use my time?"! We have asked ourselves these very questions and believe that this tour delivers some of the very best birdwatching on offer with the opportunity for such a great range of species. During this new eight night tour, based in first class perfectly located rural hotels, a superb range of habitat types will be visited with a wonderful array of birds and wildlife on offer with a little culture included too. These tours have been designed to appeal to those visiting Scotland from abroad or those wishing to experience an excellent cross section of what is on offer here.



Meeting in Edinburgh, our first destination is the Isle of Mull, famous for eagles, both Golden and White-tailed, as well as Otter. We'll also take in the seabird colonies of Staffa and Lunga and visit the historic island of Iona. From here we make our way to the mainland and the beautiful area of Speyside and the Cairngorms in search of mountain species such as Ptarmigan, Ring Ouzel, Dotterel and Mountain Hare, and pine forest specialists including Scottish and Common Crossbill, Crested Tit, Siskin and Red Squirrel. Finally we will make our way back towards Edinburgh for some cultural highlights before concluding the tour.

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. On some departures, we may visit the Cairngorms first and then Mull.

Day 1

Arrive Edinburgh, transfer Mull

We will meet for this holiday at Edinburgh Airport at 1330 hours today. We will then traverse across the width of Scotland, heading west from Edinburgh and north past the scenic city of Stirling and then driving around the north part of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park before making



Black Guillemot

for the coastal town of Oban, a journey of around 3 hours. Along the way we hope to glimpse the special scenery of this beautiful area and will make regular short stops for photographs, comfort and refreshments. On arrival at Oban we will embark on a ferry bound for the very special island of Mull. This is a 45 minute crossing and will provide us with an opportunity of admiring the rugged landscape of Kingairloch to the north and the east coast

of Mull. We should encounter birds such as Black Guillemot and maybe a few diver species whilst sea mammals such as Harbour Porpoise and Common Seal are possible. On arrival at Craignure on Mull we will head straight to our hotel, check in and relax after a day's travelling.

Day 2-4

Mull

For those with the energy, we will offer a pre-breakfast excursion from our hotel in search of local birdlife and perhaps a brief search for the elusive Mull Otters and anything else that this wild landscape has to offer.

After breakfast we will again board our minibus and explore the Isle of Mull. We will be travelling on minor roads but they are in good condition and provide an opportunity of driving around pretty much all the exterior of Mull which is a great way to appreciate the huge buttresses of rock, sea cliffs, sandy bays and sea-weed strewn boulders of this rugged coastline. We will stop at various spots to scan for Otters and both Golden and White-tailed Eagle which call Mull their home. During our travels we should glimpse the isle of Ulva and even the Hebridean islands of Tiree and Coll.

European Otter



White-tailed Eagle

Iona is a small island situated off the Ross of Mull and, providing sea conditions permit, we hope to take the very short pedestrian crossing and soak up the atmosphere of this small community steeped in history and strong religious ties. There are usually light refreshments on offer and much to see as we wander the tracks around the small settlement. With luck we should hear the distinctive rasping call of the Corncrake and with patience we may enjoy a glimpse of this landrail in amongst the dense vegetation of the crofts and small fields.

After our fill of the Iona heritage, we return to Mull again on the 'foot ferry' and finish the day driving slowly back to our hotel and stopping for any wildlife on offer which could include Red Deer or an exciting raptor or two.

We will venture out pre-breakfast again on our second morning, looking for Otters fishing in the kelp beds just off shore and no doubt find some seals, Eiders and Red-breasted Mergansers as we do so.



Atlantic Puffin

After breakfast we will drive to the colourful harbour town of Tobermory where we hope to board a boat for a full day excursion (weather dependent) to visit the Treshnish Isles, in particular Lunga, to enjoy close-up views of Puffins, Shags, Guillemots, Razorbills and other sea-birds. As we cruise the Hebridean Sea we hope to encounter Manx Shearwaters, Gannets and keep a look –out for

migrating skua species. We should see Common Seals and if we are very lucky Harbour Porpoises and possibly other cetaceans, such as Minke Whale, that are thinly-spread in these waters.

Slippery rocks will probably greet us as we arrive at Lunga but with care we will make a landing and enjoy the sometimes comical antics of the 'clown of the seas' as the Atlantic Puffins parade just feet away! In fact it is difficult to pull yourself away from these enigmatic sea-birds but a short walk will provide close views of other colonial nesters. Smaller birds are likely to include Rock Pipit and possibly the scarce Twite. With luck we should also see the Great Skua or 'Bonxie', a marauding brute of a bird that summers on the island.

We will enjoy our packed lunches amongst patches of spring flowers and then it will be time to return to our boat and if the sea conditions permit we will explore nearby islets by boat and see the famous Fingal's Cave on the Isle of Staffa.



Tobermory

Homeward bound then for the bright harbour-side houses of Tobermory and for those still with energy we can further explore the quiet areas of Mull before returning to our hotel and enjoying a well-earned evening meal.

Day 5

Transfer from Mull to Cairngorms

Sadly this will be the day we leave the magical Isle of Mull so after our now well practised early morning excursion and Scottish breakfast we will board our minibus and head for the mainland.



After our ferry crossing, we hope to find time for an hour's exploration of the shops and streets of Oban but then we must head off to the exciting Highland Region and away from the dramatic coastline of West Scotland.

En-route we will travel north and east, hugging the shores of Loch Linnhe and pass through Fort William, which may be a suitable stop for refreshments. We

continue our journey and enter the Cairngorms National Park and through Speyside to reach our new hotel near Aviemore. If we have time we can stop at one of a number of wildlife sites en-route, including Creag Meagaidh National Nature Reserve.

Day 6-7

Cairngorms

During the next three days, and subject to the weather, we will aim to find a kaleidoscope of traditional wildlife in this region.

Optional early morning excursions will be available each day prior to breakfast before we start our main itinerary each day.

The Findhorn Valley may provide views of Golden Eagle and can be a good place for Mountain Hare, Red Deer and singing migrants such as Tree Pipit and Common Redstart. Nearby we will seek out Red Grouse and make the effort to locate breeding Slavonian Grebes and Black-throated Divers, both stunning birds when in full summer plumage.



On at least one evening we hope to visit a mammal watching hide specifically designed to provide an opportunity of seeing close-up views, albeit through glass, of wild animals coming to feed. Wood Mouse, Red and Roe Deer and Badger are regular attendees and if we are very lucky sometimes the canny Pine Marten might appear. The evening light and viewing conditions make photography very difficult but the proximity to the animals and an opportunity to study them at length is unrivalled.



Common Crossbill

With luck we hope to take a walk up towards the Cairngorm mountain top in an effort to see the very special birds up there, particularly Ptarmigan and Dotterel. Birds of the surrounding Caledonian Forests include Crested Tit, crossbill species, Common Redstarts and just a few Black Grouse. We should find Red Squirrel in this area and will make use of some of the RSPB reserves dotted around to find Ospreys and other raptors and breeding waders and song birds.

We will check the streams and rivers in our search for Grey Wagtail and Dipper; the plentiful Willow Warblers, Cuckoos, Siskins and Lesser Redpolls should find us!

On our journeys around this idyllic landscape we will see castles, country houses, land managed for woodland and evidence of other aspects of eco-tourism. We will be taking short excursions on foot from the minibus during our days but rarely travelling more than a mile or two from the vehicle and will use local cafes, or get sandwiches from a local shop for flexibility.



Osprey

Day 8

Depart Cairngorms, transfer to Edinburgh

On this day we will sadly leave our fine accommodation and meander through Speyside, perhaps stopping at one or two locations en-route to sample the last of the special wildlife of this region. Once we leave the Cairngorms proper we will travel south through Perth and Kinross and if we make good time hope to pop in to Loch Leven for late refreshments and a comfort stop. By evening we should have travelled over the Firth of Forth road bridge and will be cruising in to Edinburgh for our final night of the tour.

Day 9

Depart Edinburgh

Should travelling arrangements permit, opportunities may be available to spend time in Edinburgh to savour the culture and tourist hot spots of this historic city before we must all head off on our separate ways. There is much to see in Scotland's capital city and an extension in Edinburgh can also be easily arranged. Some suggestions of places to visit are detailed below. Depending on interest, there may also be a short birding excursion this morning, either within the city or nearby.



Images courtesy of Shutterstock & Alison Steel

Tour grading

Grade A/B. We will undertake a variety of walks, with most of them not being particularly long or strenuous (any longer walks will be optional), with the exception of Cairngorm, which has a significant height gain. The tour is suitable for anyone who is happy to walk up to six or seven miles over the course of a day. There will be some early optional starts each day, and late finishes.

Arrival / departure details

It is now very challenging to access Edinburgh Waverly Station by private vehicle, so will pick up group members from Edinburgh Airport before travelling to catch our ferry to Mull from Oban. Exact timings will be confirmed in the tour final joining instructions, but are likely to be as follows: 1300 hours at Edinburgh Airport. At the end of the tour we expect to return to Edinburgh city centre by 1330 hours and Edinburgh Airport by 1415 hours. Those departing by air or rail from Edinburgh 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

For those arriving by train into Edinburgh, please make your way to Edinburgh Airport to meet the group (further details will be given in joining instructions sent before the tour). There is a tram service that runs frequently from the city centre out to the airport, and a stop is located near Edinburgh Waverley and Haymarket Stations (<https://edinburghtrams.com/>). Do not worry if our bus is a few minutes late, parking can be difficult in the airport 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 1300hrs. At the end of the trip, we normally have you back in the city by 1330 hours.

It would also be possible for you to meet the group in Oban if you would prefer. Details of the ferry times will be provided in the final joining instructions for the tour, but we would suggest making sure that you are in Oban by mid-afternoon to ensure that you have plenty of time to meet the group.

By Bus

If you arrive by bus at Edinburgh Bus Station, you can walk the short distance to Princes Street to catch a tram out to the airport to meet the group (<https://edinburghtrams.com/>).

By Air

We can meet you at Edinburgh Airport at 1300 hours; please make your way to the pick up point at the front of the airport terminal. The tour vehicle can only wait here for a limited time, so please worry if our bus is a few minutes late; it is easier for us if we are sure everyone is together before arriving.

By Car

If you come by car, you may drive directly to Edinburgh.

There are some secure parking locations in the city (some information can be found here <http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/info/20275/parking>), although you could also park at the airport or the station.

Tour Transport

For this tour we will be using small 9-seater mini-buses for the day to day travel. Please assist our tour leaders in ensuring that there is a rotation of seats around the tour vehicle(s) to allow each tour member to enjoy approximately equal time in the front. In order to be fair to all participants, we regret that we are unable to guarantee a perpetual front seat to those who might suffer from motion sickness or other concerns.

Edinburgh

If you have sufficient time in Edinburgh, you may wish to visit Edinburgh Castle, an impressive landmark that showcases an amazing collection of crown jewels, hosts the Scottish National War Museum and carries on the tradition of the one o'clock gun. It is easily reached on foot from the city centre. There is also the Palace of Holyrood and the Royal Mile that can be explored, as well as Arthur's Seat, an extinct volcano that offers up a fantastic view across the city for those with some energy.

Another royal connection is the Royal Yacht Britannia, now moored at Leith. The National Museum of Scotland opened in 2011, including archeology, geology, art, science and natural history in the same building or for those with an interest in plants there is the Royal Botanical Gardens.

We can also offer some additional recommendations for those who would like to visit Edinburgh for a longer period of time.

Accommodation in Edinburgh

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 Waverly Station (5-10min walk away):

The Scotsman Hotel

20 North Bridge, Edinburgh. EH1 1TR

0131 556 5565 <https://scotsmanhotel.co.uk>

The Balmoral

1 Princes Street, Edinburgh. EH2 2EQ

0131 556 2414 <https://www.roccofortehotels.com/hotels-and-resorts/the-balmoral-hotel>

Radisson Blue Hotel, Edinburgh City Centre

The Royal Mile, 80 High Street, Edinburgh. EH1 1TH

0131 557 9797 <https://www.radissonhotels.com/en-us/hotels/radisson-blu-edinburgh>

If you would prefer smaller, boutique-style accommodation then we suggest the following, which are situated up to 1½ miles from Waverly Station:

The Inn on The Mile

82 High Street, Edinburgh. EH1 1LL

0131 556 9940 <https://www.theinnonthemile.co.uk/>

Nira Caledonia

6-10 Gloucester Place, Edinburgh. EH3 6EF

0131 225 2720 <https://www.niracaledonia.com/>

The Glasshouse Hotel

2 Greenside Place, Edinburgh. EH1 3AA

0131 5254 8200 <https://www.theglasshousehotel.co.uk/>

The Place Hotel

34-38 York Place, Edinburgh. EH1 3HU

0131 556 7575 <https://yorkplace-edinburgh.co.uk/>

Eden Locke, George Street

127 George Street, Edinburgh. EH2 4JN

0131 526 4190 <https://lockeliving.com/eden-locke/>

No11

11 Brunswick Street, Edinburgh. EH7 5JB

0131 557 6910 <https://www.11brunswickst.co.uk/>

The Witchery by the Castle

352 Castlehill, Edinburgh. EH1 2NF

0131 225 5613 <https://www.thewitchery.com/>

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

Food & accommodation

For this holiday all breakfasts and dinners are included, however lunches will be at your own expense and will be taken at various local pubs and cafes or picked up from a local shop. After a hearty breakfast, lunches will be kept fairly brief and light in order to maximise our time in the field. Snacks and water will be carried with us to keep us going! Our hotels are very comfortable and perfectly located.

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.

Inclusions/ Exclusions

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

- Accommodation in comfortable hotels on DBB basis
- Transport from Edinburgh
- 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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