The Scottish Hebrides by Land & Sea

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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Departs
May or June

Dates and Prices
See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GBR69)

Grading
Grade B. Moderate day walks only, but participants need to be able to move around a small boat at sea.

Focus
Birds, and other wildlife

Highlights
• Visit the beautiful Isles of Lewis and Harris
• Waders and divers in breeding plumage
• Possibility of rare passage migrants
• Escape the crowds on our mini cruise, taking to the sea in search of seabirds and cetaceans
• Visit the stunning Shiant Islands with huge colonies of breeding seabirds, including Puffin, Fulmar, Razorbill, Kittiwake and Great Skua
• Possibility of Hen Harrier, White-tailed & Golden Eagle
• Expert Naturetrek & local leaders

Images from top: Puffin, Red-throated Diver & Manx Shearwater (courtesy of Shutterstock)
Introduction

The island of Lewis and Harris is the largest in Scotland’s beautiful Outer Hebrides, an archipelago that sits to the north-west of the Scottish mainland. Still steeped in myth and Gaelic tradition, these picturesque islands are home to a wonderful variety of exciting wildlife, which this tour will seek out on both land and sea. We begin our tour with three full days to explore Lewis and Harris. Originally settled around 8500 BC, the islands are among the earliest inhabited areas in the whole of the British Isles, with evidence remaining of Neolithic and Iron Age sites. The interior of Lewis consists of vast, sweeping peat moorlands, which in the spring shelter a variety of breeding waders, while the coast varies between sandy beaches and dramatic rocky headlands, perfect for seabird colonies. By comparison, Harris is hillier, with quiet winding roads and spectacular views across sea lochs and coastal inlets, where Otter can be found. The beaches here surely rival those anywhere in the world, with soft, pale sands that meet turquoise-blue waters and stretch before us for miles.

After a thorough exploration of the region by vehicle and on foot, we then join M/V Monadhliath for an exclusive 3-night mini-cruise around the Minch (the strait between the Outer and Inner Hebrides) that will include time enjoying the seabird colonies of the Shiant Islands and the scenic and wildlife highlights of northern Skye and the Summer Isles.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather, tides & 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 Ullapool, transfer Stornoway

For those arriving by rail or air, a pick up from Inverness will be provided. For those travelling by car, we meet at the ferry terminal in Ullapool in time for the afternoon crossing (precise details for the meeting arrangements will be provided in the tour joining instructions approximately three weeks prior to departure). After boarding the ferry we will find a good lookout location for our 2.5 hour crossing to Stornoway. On a clear day it’s possible to see a good variety of species from the ferry, including Manx Shearwater, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Fulmar, Northern Gannet, etc.
Harbour Porpoise and Short-beaked Common Dolphin. If we are fortunate we may also come across the rarer Pomarine or Long-tailed Skua, or, if we are very lucky, perhaps even a Minke Whale!

On arrival we will make our way from the ferry terminal to the hotel for the first of our nights in Stornoway. Stornoway is the largest settlement on the Western Isles, with its name coming from the Norse for ‘Steering Bay’ (in reference to its sheltered waters). There is plenty of historical interest to be found in the town, including reference to the Viking Leod, the founder of the MacLeod clan. Lews Castle, which presides over the harbour, contains an interesting museum and the extensive grounds are well worth exploring.

**Days 2 – 4**

We will spend the next three days enjoying day trips to explore the island, though the exact order of these will depend on the weather and other local considerations (Sundays are still strictly observed here, more so on Lewis than Harris).

There will be an optional pre-breakfast excursion each morning for those who wish. We may explore Lews Castle grounds, visit some lochans along the Phentland road for divers or watch some of the sheltered bays near Stornoway. At this time of year a good number of migrants are arriving and, along with Blackcap, Great Tit and Chiffchaff, we may find a Wood Warbler or Grey Wagtail in Lews Castle grounds, which provides some of the few forested areas on the islands. Spring is a fantastic time of year to visit as a number of unusual species can turn up just about anywhere during the migration!

One day will be spent along the west coast and most northerly part of the island, at Ness Point and the Butt of Lewis. As we drive across the peat moors and past the small lochans that make up much of this landscape, we will be looking out for Red and Black-throated Divers, such waders as Greenshank, Redshank, Ruff and Whimbrel, and raptors including Merlin and Hen Harrier. Once we reach the west coast road, we will aim to stop at a small loch known to have breeding Red-necked Phalarope in previous years. If we are fortunate, they will be here again. Some of these lochans are near the shore and will be surrounded by machair; highly colourful as it starts to come into summer flower.
Around Ness, meanwhile, we will be looking out for Common Redpoll, White Wagtail and Brambling. From the Butt of Lewis lighthouse, with its 80 foot cliffs, we can look out to sea and scan for Skua (Arctic, Great, Pomarine and Long-tailed are all possible), Iceland and Glaucous Gull, Fulmar, Gannet and any lingering migrants. On shore we may find Northern Wheatear, or a rarer spring visitor.

At almost any time, we may see the distinctive silhouette in the sky of either a White-tailed or Golden Eagle, both of which breed on the islands in some numbers (not to be confused with the ‘tourist eagle’ or Common Buzzard, which is regularly seen throughout the islands!)

On another day we will head south, towards Harris. We will pass stunningly beautiful white sand beaches, set below dramatic hills, as we search for flocks of sea ducks on the sheltered water, with Eider, Long-tailed Duck and Scoter among those we may find. Near the divide between Lewis and Harris, there are some crags where we will hope to find nesting Golden Eagles. Using telescopes from a sensible distance, we should be able to see either the adults or chicks in the nest. This part of the island is another excellent location for Merlin, as their prey of Meadow Pipit and Skylark are prevalent here, so we will find a place where we can scan the uplands in search of these tiny raptors.

In quieter corners of the island there is a good chance of finding Otter, and we will spend some of the day in search of these charismatic creatures, as well as enjoying the peacefulness of one of the beautiful beaches.

The final day will see us head north again, but this time along the east coast of Lewis. From the road out towards Tolsta we will stop at a couple of locations where White-tailed Eagle have been known to nest. Over 15 breeding territories are now thought to have been established here and the islands are an important site for this species. At Col and Broad Bay the saltmarshes and sheltered seas are excellent feeding grounds for waders, divers and waterfowl, and we may find a few remaining Whooper Swans. Out on the water it’s quite possible to see two, and occasionally three, species of diver (Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern) plus Dunlin, Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Snipe and Curlew among the small pools near the shoreline. Finally, we will make our way to Tiumpan Head, a headland looking out over The Minch, and another great place to do some sea watching from, both for seabirds and cetaceans.
If we have a fine evening, there will be the opportunity to head out of Stornoway to a site known for Corncrake. Around 50% of the UK’s breeding population returns here each year, making it one of the best places to try and find one. These are particularly elusive birds to see, however we would hope to at least hear their rasping ‘Crek crek’ call ringing through the evening air.

Time permitting, we may stop one day at the Callanish Standing Stones near Carloway. The Callanish Stones are from the Neolithic Era, pre-dating the Stonehenge circle and the Egyptian pyramids. Their exact purpose is unknown, but the most likely use for was for ritualistic ceremonies.

Day 5

We begin today again with a pre-breakfast walk or excursion. Then, after breakfast, we will board the MV Monadhliath, a traditional fishing boat that has been converted into a compact, but comfortable wildlife watching vessel. After finding our cabins and a short safety brief, we will make our way out of Stornoway harbour. Initially we will head south from Stornoway, following the coastline, although our exact route will vary depending on where the wildlife is. We will be looking out for Great and Arctic Skua, Northern Gannet, Guillemot, Razorbill, White-tailed Eagle and Storm Petrel as well as cetaceans which may include Short-beaked Common Dolphin, Risso’s Dolphin, Harbour Porpoise and Minke Whale. Those in a playful mood may come and interact with us, bow-riding the boat and generally showing off. Larger flocks of birds are a good indication of the presence of fish and, where possible, we will head towards those to see what’s been attracted in.

Weather permitting, we will anchor off the Shiant Islands this evening, where we can start to take in the scale of its seabird extravaganza. Should this not be possible, we will make our way into one of the sheltered sea lochs instead.
Day 6

This morning we will make our way to the Shiant Islands. Hopefully, we will have spent the night anchored just off the beach and will take the short RIB journey to the shore. Thousands of seabirds breed here each year, and the noise of so many birds in a small area can be incredible. Puffins, Gannets, Guillemots, Black Guillemots, Cormorants, Shags, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and Skuas are among the species that return here each year to raise their chicks. Roughly 10% of the UK’s Puffins and 8% of Razorbills breed here each year, making them one of this country’s most important sites for breeding seabirds. Thanks to a new rat eradication programme, Storm Petrel are now also returning to breed on the islands.

There are a few different walks that we might take, each spectacular in its own way and, on a clear day, we will enjoy great views across the surrounding islands and sea. The trilling call of tiny Wrens rises above the sound of the sea, and we are likely to also encounter Meadow and Rock Pipits as well as Northern Wheatear. Later in the afternoon, once we’ve had plenty of time to enjoy our surroundings, we must reluctantly board the boat again to head for our new anchorage. The journey is likely to take several hours and we can relax on the boat, watching out for passing wildlife.

Tonight we are aiming to arrive at the north coast of Skye, an island whose rugged scenery has made it a popular and increasingly busy tourist destination. Exploring from the sea, however, is the perfect way to avoid the crowds, while still experiencing what this magical island has to offer.
Gairloch and Loch Ewe in search of feeding seabirds, before arriving at the Summer Isles. En-route we will again be looking out for feeding frenzies with good number of birds, which also indicates the possibility of other wildlife too. By late afternoon or early evening we will anchor off the Summer Isles, situated near the entrance to Loch Broom, around a mile from the Coigach Peninsula. There are around 20 islands, rocks and skerries that make up the group and the largest, Tanera Mor, was once part of the thriving herring industry. It is now almost completely deserted, populated by wildlife rather than people, with over 2,000 pairs of breeding Storm Petrel on Eilean a Chleirich (or Priest Island). Overnight we are likely to hear their haunting cry as adult birds return to their nesting sites.

Day 8 Disembark Ullapool

We hope for some fine weather for our final morning on the Summer Isles. After a final look around we will need to re-board the MV Monadhliath and make our way to Ullapool, where we will disembark. There will still be the opportunity on the journey for some wildlife watching, with Harbour Porpoise, Common Dolphin and Grey or Harbour Seals being possible, even close to the town.

Tour grading

Grade B. Walks will mainly be easy to moderate day walks, however there may be some steeper slopes on some of the islands and good footing is required for moving around the boat while at sea. You will also need to be able to get in and out of the small RIB on stony beaches where there may be slippery rocks.
Weather

Weather in the Outer Hebrides and west coast is as unpredictable as anywhere else in Britain at this time of year. It is likely to be quite cool in the mornings and evenings, and, although we hope for dry, settled conditions, we should be prepared for some wet weather. Warm, waterproof garments, both jacket and trousers, are recommended as rain is always possible. We would also recommend bringing waterproof boots, such as walking boots, to keep your feet dry.

Arrival / departure details

We anticipate that the majority of the group will arrive into Inverness and so this will be our first meeting point. Exact timings will be confirmed in the tour final joining instructions, but are likely to be as follows: 1300 hours at Inverness Airport and 1345 hours at Inverness Railway Station. At the end of the tour we expect to return to Inverness Railway Station by 1330 hours. Those departing by rail from Inverness should arrange trains to depart after these times. As train and flight 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 Air

We meet at Inverness Airport at 1300 hours at the beginning of the trip (further details will be given in joining instructions sent before the tour). At the end of the trip, we normally return to the airport by 1415 hours.

By Train

We meet at Inverness Railway Station at 1345 hours at the beginning of the trip (further details will be given in joining instructions sent before the tour). At the end of the trip, we normally return to the station by 1330 hours.

By Bus

There are a number of buses to Inverness and the bus station is only a short distance from the railway station, so we would ask those arriving by bus to make their way to the main entrance of Inverness Railway Station for 1345 hours.

It is also possible to take a bus to Ullapool if anyone would like to spend an additional day or two there.

By Car

If you come by car, you are welcome to drive directly to Ullapool and meet the group in time for the afternoon ferry. There is a free car park in Ullapool, by the Tesco at the end of Latheron Lane, where you can leave your car during the tour. Please make your way to the ferry terminal to meet the group. They are likely to arrive around 1600 hours.
Accommodation & Food

Accommodation will be in a comfortable tourist hotel in Stornoway where all rooms have private facilities. A limited number of single rooms are available for a supplement. On board the boat there are a couple of different cabin types, some of which have a supplementary cost attached. There are only 4 client cabins available on this very exclusive cruise and these are as follows:

- 1 standard twin cabin: at tour cost
- 1 small twin cabin: reduction of £75 per person
- 1 single cabin: included within tour single room supplement
- 1 large twin bow cabin with skylight window: additional £100 per person

Breakfast and evening meals in Stornoway are included in the tour price but LUNCHES ARE NOT INCLUDED. Wherever possible, the leader will try to arrange the programme so that group members will be able to choose whether to have a cooked meal or a picnic lunch, and anyone preferring the latter option will be able to visit a shop. Once aboard the boat meals are included on a full board basis.

Inclusions/ Exclusions

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

- Accommodation in comfortable accommodation on a dinner, bed & breakfast basis in Stornoway.
- Cabin accommodation on a full board basis during the cruise.
- The daily excursions from Stornoway.
- Entrance fees for planned activities.
- Ferry ticket to Stornoway.
- Transfers from and to Inverness

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

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

Tour Transport

For the land section of this tour we will be using a small 9-seater mini-bus for the day to day travel. Please assist our tour leader and guide 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.
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.