



## Midsummer and Mingulay Special

Dates: 19<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> June 2021



In midsummer the nights are very short out here in the Outer Hebrides with only a couple of hours of darkness. The breeding season is in full swing for many birds whilst the machair and adjacent land is beginning to show some of its true colours. It's a time of year when the diversity of wildlife is almost at its peak and this trip looks at all aspects of natural history from Otters to eagles, to butterfly orchids and insects. We'll also take a boat trip to Mingulay which is likely to be the highlight of the trip with spectacular seabird colonies and coastal scenery. Our first trip here in 2016 was a great success with superb views of Puffins, Razorbills, Guillemots, Great Skua and an incredible close up of the cliffs and geos of the western coast of this dramatic island.

This is an excellent time of year to see Short-eared Owls as they're busy feeding young and with the demands of supplying enough food for them often means the adults have to hunt well into the day. Other diurnal birds of prey will also feature and we'll see both Golden and White-tailed Eagles as well as Hen Harrier, Merlin and Peregrine Falcon. Black-throated Diver and Red-throated Divers breed whilst one or two Great Northern Divers often hang on into the summer and may be found during the week. Another group of breeding species that the islands are famed for is the waders. Some will have already finished, such as the Lapwing whilst others will also be busy feeding young such as Ringed Plover and Dunlin. One of the most specialist and rarest waders breeding in the UK, the Red-necked Phalarope may

also be found with a bit of luck. They arrive at the end of May although once the females have courted the males they soon depart, leaving the male secretively incubating the eggs.

Otters are always a favourite and sure to be seen at some point during a week-long tour. The myriad of freshwater and sea lochs are ideal habitat for them whilst some of these same sea lochs support Harbour Seals which are giving birth at this time year. The larger and more robust Grey Seal will also be seen although these don't have their young until November. The water's off the west coast are quite shallow relatively speaking and don't support many cetaceans although Bottle-nosed Dolphins are resident and may be seen. We may also see Basking Shark if lucky as it really depends on the year and the number that enter Hebridean waters.

South Uist in particular is probably one of the best sites in Scotland for Lesser Butterfly Orchid with colonies numbering over a thousand flower spikes seen in some areas. The Hebridean form of Common Spotted Orchid is also in flower now and we should also see Early and Northern Marsh Orchids. Early flowers such as Bird's-foot Trefoil create carpets of flowers on the machair which in turn attract pollinating insects including the rare Great Yellow Bumblebee. We shall look for dragonflies and try our hand at moth trapping which can produce such gems as the Ghost Moth, Drinker, Fox Moth and Northern Eggar whilst Six-spot Burnet and the rare Argent and Sable may be found during the day. This is a very diverse tour which will provide a great insight into the islands fascinating natural history.



### **Itinerary:**

Day 1: We'll spend much of today exploring Benbecula which is an over-looked island rich in wildlife. The east side has breeding Arctic Skua, Greenshank, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Golden Eagle and both Red-throated and Black-throated Diver. Although much of it is not easy to access there are certain spots that allow us to penetrate these wild areas and hopefully get close to some of its inhabitants. Whilst the east side is mainly moorland and loch the west side is machair and loch. These two broad habitats are actually quite different with the machair lochs being much richer in nutrients and supporting many more nesting birds such as Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon, Dunlin, Snipe and the rare Red-necked Phalarope which with a bit of luck we'll catch up with today. The alkaline machair supports a different array of flowering plants than the moorland as well as many insects which in turn provide food for

nesting Lapwings and Ringed Plover as well as Skylarks. Corncrakes are also found in this habitat and although they can be difficult by late June there's a chance that we will connect with one with a bit of patience.

Day 2: We'll head to North Uist and start with the Committee Road which cuts across the middle of the moorland. Stopping at various spots along this single track road we should be able to pick up some good moorland specialities including Arctic Skua, Greenshank, Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier. We may also spot Golden Eagle as a couple of territories reach from either side of the road and meet here. We continue around the north-west of the island, pausing at a tidal area to look for Otters. The scenery is stunning and makes a fine backdrop to this site which is also good for Red-throated Diver and Cuckoo. At the far north-west we'll take a walk out to the coast at Scolpaig where a deep water channel comes closest to the island. If we're lucky we could encounter a Minke Whale or dolphins although these are by no means guaranteed unlike Manx Shearwater which gather off here in feeding flocks that have travelled from the inner Hebridean island of Rum. A couple of freshwater lochs here regularly hold over-summering Whooper Swans and occasionally we see otters. A little further south we reach the RSPB reserve at Balranald. This cracking area holds some of the few remaining Corn Buntings in the islands and in fact, for the whole west coast of Scotland. It's also good for Corncrakes although seeing them is often tricky at this time of year. Finally we'll pop in at Loch Sandary to see what wildfowl, waders and gulls are present before heading back to our guesthouse for a rest before dinner.

Day 3: At some point during the week (weather depending) we'll take a boat trip to Mingulay which we catch from Castle Bay in Barra.

Day 4: We head south today to the scenic and very productive Loch Eynort. This excellent area of mixed woodland, sea loch and moorland is a great mix of habitat that provides us with an opportunity to see a good mix of birds and other wildlife. Raptors are a feature here and we have a good chance of picking up Golden Eagle and White-tailed Eagle amongst others. The sheltered tidal loch acts as a fish nursery and attracts feeding Red-throated Divers, Black Guillemots and Red-breasted Mergansers as well as both Common and Arctic Terns. Otters also take advantage of the rich pickings and a regular sight here whilst Harbour Seals come to have their pups at this time of year. It's a great spot and we'll linger in the area for a couple of hours before heading back to the west coast. Almost opposite Loch Eynort and just a few miles away lies the headland of Rubha Ardvule. The bays and coastline are ideal for feeding gulls and waders whilst the peninsula itself supports breeding Eiders and Arctic Terns. Seabirds are often picked up passing with an almost constant stream of Gannets although we should also see Manx Shearwater and possibly Storm Petrel. This is another good spot for otters and we can often compare both Grey and Harbour Seals side by side. Finally on our way back north we'll call in at Stoneybridge where we'll find Lesser Butterfly Orchids growing amongst the rough grass whilst the coast often holds over-

summering waders such as Sanderling, Whimbrel and the odd Knot. We'll also pause by the Howmore River before returning to the guesthouse before dinner.

Day 5: Berneray lies in the Sound of Harris and has been connected to North Uist via a causeway since 2001. This is our destination this morning and we'll take time to explore the northern part of the island in particular. The views across to Harris and Skye are stunning with the coastline at Rushgarry regularly holding a selection of waders and gulls, whilst off-shore we should be able to spot the odd diver, Razorbill, Guillemot and Black Guillemot. Arctic and Little Terns often fish along the tide line here whilst there's always the chance of an otter and if the weather is calm enough a Harbour Porpoise. After a spell here we'll drive across to the northern end of the freshwater, Loch Bhrusda which provides a bathing ground for both Little and Arctic Terns that nest nearby. One or two pairs of Dunlin breed at the northern end of the loch whilst Lapwings are common. We'll take a walk across the machair which is rich in flowers and supports a good variety, as well as the more unusual Adder's-tongue Fern. We come out through the dunes at a superb spot overlooking the Sound of Pabbay where we should be able to see seabirds coming and going and possibly an over-summering Great Northern Diver. After an enjoyable few hours we'll leave Berneray and head around the northern side of North Uist, stopping en route to look for Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl before taking the Committee Road through the centre of the island back towards our base in Benbecula.

Day 6: Our last morning is flexible although if time allows we'll head to Loch Stilligarry in South Uist and take a circular walk via Howmore River across Drimsdale machair. The loch is a good site for breeding wildfowl and often holds Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and Tufted Duck whilst the reed bed supports Reed Bunting and Sedge Warbler. Skylarks are common on the machair and we should be able to find a variety of waders as well as Eiders along the coast before returning via the small Sand Martin colony now established near Drimsdale township, rounding off a great week.

**Dates:** 19<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> June 2021

**Tour duration:** 5 nights / 6 days on the islands.

**Cost:** £900 per person

Accommodation is provided in some of the best local guesthouses for 5 nights.

All meals are provided with evening meals taken in local hotels. If you have special dietary requirements please let us know when booking.

**Group size:** 8 (maximum)

**Booking:** Please email: [steveduffield70@gmail.com](mailto:steveduffield70@gmail.com)

**Where to meet:** The tour begins and ends in Uist. If you arrive by plane or as a foot passenger off the ferry we will be there to meet you and take you to your accommodation. If you arrive early and are already in the islands on the first day then you'll be picked up in the morning and we'll explore local habitats and wildlife whilst others arrive during the morning. On the last day we'll continue to search for wildlife until everyone has departed on their various flight / ferry connections.

**Getting to the islands:** Loganair operate regular flights between Glasgow and Benbecula. Alternatively Calmac operate ferries between Uig, Skye - Lochmaddy, North Uist and from Mallaig - Lochboisdale, South Uist. Once on the islands I will be there to meet you and take you to your accommodation before we head into the field.

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