



Barra to the Butt

Dates: 10th – 17th September

This popular tour starts at the southern end of the archipelago in Barra and works its way north to the very top of Lewis. We spend one night in Barra, visiting the lovely small island of Vatersay in the far south before making our way to Uist and Benbecula. We spend three nights here before continuing north through Harris and our base for the next three nights in Lewis. This is an excellent trip to get a taste of the islands as we explore some of the most scenic sites as well as others that are off the beaten track.



Vatersay is pretty small but a walk on the machair at the southern end is a great introduction to the islands with golden beaches and flower-rich meadows. The bays hold flocks of Eiders and the odd diver whilst we need to keep an eye on the sky as there's chance of both Golden and White-tailed Eagle. A spin around Barra's single track roads takes us to the northern end and views across the Sound of Barra which we sail across with one of the regular Calmac ferries in the afternoon. The ferry itself is a good spot for seeing wildlife and we have a chance of seeing Black-throated Diver as well as various seabirds and Grey Seals.

The next leg sees us explore the islands collectively known as the Uists (North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist). We'll visit the best sites during the two full days we have here and can expect to pick up a wealth of raptors including Hen Harrier which we won't see

further north. We'll also search for otters and visit one of the best locations for Harbour Seals. On North Uist we'll visit the RSPB reserve at Balranald where we hope to find some of the few remaining Corn Buntings and take a walk around the headland at Aird an Runair.

Leaving Uist we take the ferry to Harris making the most of the crossing to pick up any wildlife which may include Great Northern Diver, Great Skua and White-tailed Eagle. Once on Harris we'll stop off at a couple of locations as we head north, including the very scenic Sound of Taransay. We should be able to locate Common Scoters here and have in the past seen Surf Scoter from the main road. The road to Lewis passes the Clisham (the highest point in the islands) and through the rocky landscape of north Harris until we reach the border with Lewis. We'll pause here to scan the surrounding area as this is good spot for eagles. We now have two full days to explore Lewis with the first day taking us across the Pentland Road to the west side of the island where we'll pop into a site near the Callanish Stones to look for otters before taking various detours to visit sites along the northwest coast between here and Barvas. On the last full day we'll reach our most northerly point at the Butt of Lewis where we'll spend a bit of time looking over the sea from the lighthouse for passing seabirds and cetaceans before exploring Port of Ness and Loch Stiapabhat. Before we say our goodbyes on our final morning in Lewis we'll take a trip to Tiumpan Head which is a key location for whales and dolphins. Calm conditions and patience are generally required to spot anything here and many of the cetaceans can be distant although have included various dolphins, Orcas and even Humpback Whale.



Day 1: We'll meet in Barra today and for those that come by plane we'll have a short walk in the afternoon before an evening meal in a local hotel.

Day 2: This morning we'll head to the southern shore of Vatersay and take a short walk across the machair to the Sound of Sanday. Various auks, Shag and Kittiwakes are usually present whilst the cultivated machair supports Skylarks and Twite. We also need to keep an eye on the skies as there's a chance of a Golden or White-tailed Eagle heading over as we complete our circular walk. Leaving Vatersay we cross a small causeway back to Barra and follow the circular road around the west side of the island taking the turning to Eoligarry, past the airport to the northern end of the island. We'll have a look from Eoligarry Pier for divers, terns and Eiders before heading to the northernmost part of the island to have a look

at the flower-rich, roadside fields. Mid-afternoon we'll catch the ferry from Ardmhor, Barra to Eriskay. The crossing gives us an opportunity to get close views of Black Guillemot, Razorbill, Guillemot, Red-throated Diver and Gannet. Eagles are sometimes seen over the islands scattered throughout the Sound of Barra. We'll see Atlantic Grey Seals hauled out on one of these small islands and there's a chance of Basking Shark and Bottle-nosed Dolphins. We land near Prince's Strand on Eriskay before continuing north to our base for the next three nights in Benbecula.

Day 3: South Uist is a long, thin island with a short range of hills rising dramatically from sea level to 600m whilst just a couple miles to the west lies the coastal plain known as the machair. We'll visit some of the best sites on the island today, starting at North Loch Eynort where a short walk takes us through Archie's garden to a view point and series of paths that provide a good vantage point to scan the surrounding hills and loch. We're not just here to admire the scenery as birds of prey are often a feature with all eight resident species a possibility. Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Peregrine and Hen Harrier all breed in the area whilst Red-throated Divers breed on small lochans on the moors, coming down to the sea loch to look for fish. Other birds found on the loch include Red-breasted Merganser and Black Guillemot whilst mammals include good numbers of Harbour Seals which are pupping in June and July. This is also one of the best sites for otters in the islands. Leaving the east side we'll head west across Bornish machair to Rubha Ardvule to explore the bays and headland. Waders at this site may include over-summering Sanderling, Knot and Whimbrel whilst the ubiquitous Oystercatcher is a constant companion along the coastline. Arctic Terns and Eiders also breed here whilst both Grey and Harbour Seals can often be compared side by side at this site. Leaving Ardvule we'll travel north, parallel to the coast stopping off at Stoneybridge and Howmore for a short walk on our way back to base.

Day 4: Our island of choice today is North Uist and we'll explore the western side where we should be able to find some of the last remaining Corn Buntings in the Outer Hebrides. Loch Sandary is always worth a look for wildfowl and is easily viewable from the vehicle en route to Balranald. The RSPB reserve at Balranald is a great spot for a walk with superb floral displays in July / August attracting insects such as the rare Great Yellow Bumblebee, which finds a stronghold here in Uist. Various waders are usually found along the strand line whilst off-shore you can often see passing Manx Shearwaters, Gannets and Fulmars. There's also a chance of finding otters here too. Leaving Balranald we'll continue a circular tour of the island keeping our eyes out for Short-eared Owl, Hen Harrier and Golden Eagle as we travel around the north-west and onto the eastern side. On the opposite side of North Uist lies the main village of Lochmaddy; this is a great spot for otters and we have a good chance of finding one or two here. White-tailed Eagles usually breed nearby, if not in the bay itself and their great bulk can be seen from a great distance if they're perched on a hilltop, which they regularly do in calm weather. We'll spend a bit of time exploring the bay before heading south and taking a short walk at Langass Lodge to the standing stones. From here we return to Benbecula and the guesthouse to freshen up before the evening meal at a local hotel.

Day 5: We leave the southern isles today and head for the ferry at Berneray which will take us across the Sound of Harris to Leverburgh, Harris. The ferry provides us with more opportunities to get close to various auks and terns as we sail a convoluted course across this shallow stretch of water. Eiders gather here and Red-throated Divers are regularly seen. A few pairs of Great Skua and the odd Arctic Skua have started breeding on some of the small islands that are dotted along the ferry route and can be regularly seen attacking terns or Gannets as they commute and feed in these sheltered waters. Otter and White-tailed Eagle are also both possible on this hour-long journey. Once on Harris we'll head north to the Sound of Taransay where we'll take a break and look for sea ducks that should include Common Scoter. The views are simply stunning with aquamarine waters, golden sands to a back drop of the highest peaks in the Outer Hebrides. We pass through the edge of Taret; the capital of Harris, before reaching the southern side of the Clisham. Here the road climbs between the peaks although before this a minor road, heads off to the west. We'll take this road for a mile or two (past perhaps the remotest tennis court in the country) until we reach a viewpoint where we can search for eagles. Both Golden and White-tailed Eagles are possible and if the weather is in our favour we could be treated to numerous birds. Continuing north we should reach Stornoway in the late afternoon and settle in to the new guesthouse before an evening meal.

Day 6: This morning we'll take the minor road from Stornoway to Breasaclate. This is known as the Pentland Road and crosses apparently barren moorland and acidic lochs. Merlin inhabit the moor and sometimes Red-throated or Black-throated Divers are obvious on the lochs. As the road begins to drop we sometimes encounter Golden Eagle as we reach the outskirts of Breasaclate. Nearby we'll visit the ancient Callanish Stones which stand on a raised mound overlooking a sea loch that is a good site for otters and occasionally Black-throated Diver. From here we'll travel north-west to Carloway stopping briefly at the Iron Age broch to marvel at this impressive structure. Golden Eagle are also regular here so it's worth keeping your binoculars handy. We continue following the road that runs parallel with the coast towards Barvas, stopping at various points to take minor side roads to various hidden lochs and bays that should provide us with a good variety of wildlife. One of the most productive of these is Loch Ordais at Bragar. The small freshwater loch and sheltered bay regularly hold various species of wildfowl and waders as well as the odd Great Yellow Bumblebee and another chance of an otter. We finally take the main road back from Barvas to Stornoway, completing a roughly circular route.

Day 7: On our final full day we'll reach the most northerly point in the main island chain at the Butt of Lewis. The dramatic, contorted cliffs offer a good vantage point to view the sea where we have a chance of spotting Basking Shark and dolphins as well as various shearwaters, Gannets, Kittiwakes and auks. Ravens parade up and down the coastline and Fulmars glide past with ease. We'll also take a look at Port of Ness where traditionally the chosen men of Ness landed their catch of young Gannets from Sula Sgeir which still takes place to this day. This lovely little port overlooks a small sandy bay where we find various

terns and passing seabirds. Nearby is Loch Stiapabhat; this small freshwater loch is a real magnet to migrant wildfowl, waders and gulls that may have just crossed huge areas of open water to the relative safety and haven this loch offers. Golden Plover, Lapwing and various other waders should be on the machair whilst the loch usually holds a decent variety of wildfowl. A small hide, recently built allows us to get good views of the loch in relative comfort. As we begin our journey back towards Stornoway we'll stop off at a couple of small sites to look for seabirds, wildfowl and waders before a short stop at the guesthouse before our evening meal.

Day 8: On our final morning we'll head across the Braighe, stopping to have a look at Loch Branahuie and the sea to the south which often holds Black-throated Divers in breeding plumage at this time of year. Arctic Terns are sometimes joined by Common and Little Terns and we should find Razorbill and Black Guillemot amongst others. Common Dolphins are also possible although perhaps more likely from Tiumpan Head where we'll spend a bit of time. Cetaceans are often distant and patience is needed but sightings of whales and dolphins are probably more regular here than from anywhere else in the Outer Hebrides. This is also a good spot for Basking Sharks so with a bit of luck it should provide a fitting end to a very enjoyable and varied week.

Dates: 10th – 17th September 2016.

Tour duration: 7 nights / 8 days on the islands.

Cost: £930 per person

Accommodation is provided in some of the best local guesthouses for 7 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

Where to meet: The tour begins in Barra where I'll be there to meet you whether you arrive by plane or as a foot passenger off the ferry. We'll head straight to your overnight accommodation before an afternoon walk if you arrived by plane. On the last day we'll continue to search for wildlife in the morning dropping people off at either the ferry terminal or airport in Stornoway around mid-day. It's also possible to return to Uist if you wish as I'll be heading south to North Uist, arriving in the early evening.

Getting to the islands: Flybe operate regular flights from Glasgow to Barra where the small twin-otter plane lands on the beach. If you prefer to sail it's possible to take the ferry from Oban that calls in at Castle Bay in the evening. Leaving Stornoway there are regular flights to

Glasgow and Edinburgh. It's also possible to catch a ferry from Stornoway to Ullapool where there is a bus connection on to Inverness.

Western Isles Wildlife Contact Address:

7 Carinish, Isle of North Uist, Western Isles, HS6 5HL

Contact Steve at:

steveduffield70@gmail.com or phone 07867 555971 / 01876 580619