



Corncrake and Skuas

Dates: 10th – 16th May 2020



On-shore winds from the west or north-west accompanied by showers will bring both Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas close in-shore providing us with the opportunity for some superb views of these stunning birds. Visible passage varies each year but with a bit of luck and some wild weather, sea-watching from the headland of Aird an Runair is not to be missed. This is one of, (if not) the premier place in the UK to see these birds in spring. Other species of seabird will also be passing and besides all 4 species of skua, will include Manx Shearwater, Kittiwakes, Arctic Terns and Gannets. If you're really lucky then we may even see a summer plumage Sabine's Gull or Leach's Petrel although conditions do have to be wild to bring these inshore. Divers will also be on the move and both Great Northern Diver and Red-throated Diver will be seen. We have also witnessed passage White-billed Diver on more than one occasion from here in May.

The Uists are also one of the best places in the UK to see the enigmatic Corncrake. They start arriving from their African wintering grounds in late April although May is the best month to catch up with them as they are very active at this time of year with males competing for the best territories. Vegetation is often quite low and limited to stands of iris and nettles which the Corncrakes use for early cover. The distinctive call can often be heard

emanating from these patches but with a bit of patience and using the vehicle as a hide we often gain superb views of these normally secretive birds.

Another spectacle at this time of year is the huge numbers of waders bound for the Arctic that throng the beaches and machair with summer plumage Sanderling, Turnstone and Purple Sandpipers amongst masses of Dunlin and Ringed Plover. Some of the bays are so alive with north-bound birds feeding up, that the ground appears to be heaving and the sheer numbers is almost overwhelming. Whimbrel also pass through in good numbers in the first half of May whilst there's also the chance of a wayward Dotterel or possibly something rarer. Small birds are represented with passerines typical of more open habitats such as Meadow Pipit and Skylark as well as Corn Bunting and Wheatears which can appear to be everywhere as numbers of local breeders are enhanced by migrants heading for Greenland. Summer migrants include Sedge Warbler, Willow Warbler and the odd Chiffchaff although most years we also pick up stray Wood Warbler and possibly Redstart.

All this is backed up with a supporting cast of raptors and breeding divers. 8 species of diurnal birds of prey are available including White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier, Peregrine and Merlin whilst in addition, Short-eared Owls can regularly be found quartering rough grass and moorland. Add to that, breeding plumage Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern Diver and you can't fail to have a good time.



Itinerary:

The following is a guide to where we'll be going on which day as we will make the most of the prevailing weather conditions so that we maximise our chances of seeing a skua passage.

Day 1: Once the group have all gathered we will spend the rest of the day birding around Benbecula. The lochs lying adjacent to the machair at the south-west of the island are rich in nutrients and birdlife. They hold a good variety of breeding wildfowl including small numbers of Gadwall and Shoveler whilst Garganey are also regular and may occasionally breed. Good numbers of breeding waders are also found, including Snipe, Redshank, Lapwing and Dunlin. This is the main site for Red-necked Phalarope in the Outer Hebrides and although they don't normally start to arrive until after the 18th, it's always worth a look

as birds do occasionally turn up earlier. Nearby Stinky Bay regularly holds good numbers of waders including summer plumage Sanderling, Turnstone and Purple Sandpiper. Eiders gather in the bay, especially at low tide and have included birds resembling Northern Eider with their elegant sails held erect in display. Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl hunt over the moorland whilst Great Northern Diver and Red-throated Diver should be found along the coast. Other species could include Whimbrel, Curlew Sandpiper, Arctic Skua, Peregrine and Golden Eagle.

Day 2: This morning we'll head for Balranald and the headland of Aird an Runair to do a spot of seawatching. If the wind is in the right direction and strong enough we have a good chance of picking up both Long-tailed Skua and Pomarine Skua as well as auks, Fulmars, terns, Manx Shearwater, Kittiwakes and waders. In the right conditions this is probably one of, if not the best place in the UK for seeing skuas in spring. Arctic Terns and waders nest on the headland whilst the shore often holds good numbers of Arctic bound birds including Purple Sandpiper. If it's been a good winter for white-winged gulls then we occasionally pick up either Glaucous or Iceland Gull on the shore here too. The Balranald area is the last stronghold of Corn Buntings in the Outer Hebrides and in fact the whole west coast of Scotland. It's also an excellent site for Corncrake and we regular spot them along the access roads or around the visitor centre with birds occasionally seen crossing open ground. Later in the day we'll take a spin around the north-west of the island stopping off at a couple of locations to check roadside fields and lochs for wildfowl, waders and gulls. We'll also take the Committee Road which brings us through the middle of the moorland. We have a good chance of picking up Hen Harrier, Golden Eagle and Short-eared Owl whilst Merlin and Peregrine are also a possibility.

Day 3: This morning we'll head south to the (relatively) well-wooded area of Loch Eynort. The garden here regularly holds small numbers of migrant warblers and flycatchers whilst the tidal loch is good for Red-throated Diver, Black Guillemot, Red-breasted Merganser and otters. The dramatic scenery of moorland and hills produces a stunning backdrop when searching for birds of prey with all 8 resident species of diurnal raptors possible. This is a good site for both White-tailed Eagle and Golden Eagle with both breeding in the area. By contrast we'll follow Loch Eynort with a look around the headland of Rubha Ardvule on the west side of South Uist. This can be another good location for passage skuas and the bays regularly hold good numbers of migrant waders and gulls. From here we'll head back north, stopping at Peninerine and the nearby Howmore River. This is a great area for rarities and in spring 2014 held a territorial Short-toed Lark. Much more likely are a good selection of waders in summer plumage including strikingly patterned Turnstone and Sanderling. Whimbrel and Golden Plover are also likely to be seen whilst Dotterel are a possibility. Corncrakes are quite common in this area (the bird above was photographed here). Small numbers of wildfowl such as Teal, Wigeon and Shoveler may be present on the river, which also attract swallows and martins including recently colonising Sand Martins. Last but not

least we'll stop at a prominent hill by the roadside where if we're fortunate we may find a Golden Eagle or Peregrine Falcon looking to catch thermals at the end of the day.

Day 4: Today we head for the small island of Berneray which is now attached to North Uist by a causeway, opened in 2001. It is only a couple of miles long but has a number of attractive sites that hold good numbers of waders. The beach on the north-east side at Rushgarry can support large numbers of Ringed Plover, Turnstone and Sanderling as well as Dunlin and Purple Sandpiper. Off-shore we normally see divers which should include summer plumage Great Northern Diver as well as Black Guillemot and maybe a lingering Long-tailed Duck. Golden Plover may be present on the adjacent machair / fields with occasional Dotterel also noted. The freshwater Loch Bhrusda lies in the centre of the island and regularly holds small numbers of wildfowl whilst a small pool at the northern end often has the odd unusual bird such as Garganey, Little Stint or a late Black-tailed Godwit. The machair supports good numbers of nesting Arctic Terns as well as smaller numbers of Little Tern. Leaving Berneray we'll take the road around the north side of North Uist pausing at various sites to look for Golden Eagle and Merlin. At Grenitote we'll take a bit of time to scan the machair for Snowy Owl as this is one of their most regular haunts. They have been less frequent in recent years although have made an appearance for the last 10 years here, which makes it always worth a look. Mid-May is probably one of the best times to search for this superb species in North Uist. Depending on time we may also take a short trip across to the low-lying island of Baleshare to search a handful of freshwater lochs and take a short walk along the shore.

Day 5: This morning we head south to Smerclate, lying at the far south-west tip of South Uist. Corncrakes are regularly heard calling here whilst the shoreline is good for a mix of waders including Purple Sandpiper. We should be able to find Great Northern Diver off-shore and if conditions are calm, perhaps some of the resident Bottle-nosed Dolphins. Heading north we'll call in at Kilpheder to take a look at Loch Hallan before continuing on to Rubha Ardvule for another look around the headland. The bays on the north and south side of the peninsula can be excellent for waders whilst the headland itself supports breeding Arctic Terns and Eider. It's a good area for otters, seals and Bottle-nosed Dolphins are occasionally seen. We cross Bornish machair and pass Loch Bornish getting to and from Ardvule which is also good areas to check for migrant waders and wildfowl. From here we'll return to the excellent Loch Eynort to look for birds of prey as well as Red-throated Diver and any migrants in the wooded garden, to round off another full day in the field.

Day 6: We'll drive north this morning to Balranald and the headland of Aird an Runair once again, to hopefully get another skua fix, as it really is worth making the most of this spectacle if the weather conditions are right. We'll also look for Corncrakes around the visitor centre before making our way back south, taking in Loch Sandary and Langass Lodge en route. Relatively small Loch Sandary should provide us with a mix of wildfowl including Wigeon, Teal, Tufted Duck as well as over-summering Whooper Swans amongst others. It's

also turned up many unusual species at this time of year including Ring-billed Gull, Pectoral Sandpiper and American Wigeon. We'll follow this was a look at the nearby sites of Loch Paible and Balemore where there's a good chance of catching up with a variety of waders including Knot, Grey Plover and the occasional Curlew Sandpiper. Corn Bunting breed in the area and a walk across the machair at Balemore should produce a few birds as well as possibly Glaucous Gull and Great Northern Diver along the shore. All these waders and gulls also attract raptors with a chance of catching up with Merlin and Peregrine making the most of the abundant birdlife. Moving on we'll take a short walk at Langass Lodge to a tidal sea loch, past a coniferous plantation. Hen Harrier and Golden Eagle are frequently seen whilst the trees and shrubs behind the hotel attract the odd migrant warbler or finch which have included Hawfinch at this time of year. We'll finish with a quick look for phalaropes on the way back to the guesthouse.

Day 7: On our last day we'll take a look around the South Ford which is a complex area of fresh and salt water. It supports good numbers of waders including all the regulars plus Grey Plover which are very striking in their summer plumage. Bar-tailed Godwits are always present with small flocks regularly over-summering whilst the freshwater areas could hold scarce migrants such as Wood Sandpiper. Wigeon, Teal and Shelduck nest as do Little Terns at the north end of Loch Bee. The large numbers of birds also attract birds or prey with Peregrine and White-tailed Eagle regular whilst any of the other resident species are also possible. The headland at Ardivachar can also be good if seaweed has gathered on the shore, attracting lots of gulls and waders whilst onshore winds also bring Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas close in here too. The crofts and patches of iris make this another good area for Corncrakes with around 10 males regularly taking up territory. We'll also take a look on the north side of the South Ford, along the southern edge of Benbecula which has turned up lots of unusual species whilst the nearby complex of freshwater lochs may also hold an early returning Red-necked Phalarope or Garganey.

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Cost: £950 per person (£900 per person if 2 are sharing a room)

Accommodation is provided in some of the best local guesthouses for 6 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 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 from Glasgow to Benbecula although the earlier you book the cheaper the fares. Alternatively Calmac operate ferries between Uig, Skye - Lochmaddy, North Uist and from Oban - 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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