



## Corncrake and Phalaropes

Dates: 23<sup>rd</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020



The main aim of this trip is to enjoy good views of both Corncrake and Red-necked Phalarope although it's also a good time of year for Short-eared Owl when many can be found hunting during the day as they try to feed their ever hungry, young broods. We'll also take a short boat excursion around the island of Ronay which often allows us to get good views of divers and White-tailed Eagle.

Corncrake's are in full voice at this time of year with many of the males disputing territories. There is often little height to the vegetation still in late May so birds concentrate in the iris beds. This means that with a little patience there's an excellent chance of seeing them as the cover is very much in demand and Corncrakes can be seen scurrying around between the iris beds or even crossing the road. In some years, tame males arrive and can be seen calling in the open with little fear of people although this is by no means a regular event.

The other star is the Red-necked Phalarope which has a toe-hold as a breeding species in the UK with only a couple of pairs nesting in any given year in the Outer Hebrides. The southern isles (Uist and Benbecula) provide you with the best chance of catching up with them and the last week of May and first of June is when most birds are normally present.

Once the brighter females have mated they will often move on leaving the drabber males to incubate the eggs and guard any young. Being a single parent with lots of predators means you have to be secretive to survive and the males are scarcely seen once the females have left.



There's a rich supporting cast too with 8 resident birds of prey including both eagle species, Hen Harrier, Merlin and Peregrine as well as Short-eared Owls; the latter are commonly seen hunting during the day in late May. Once the owls' chicks have hatched they spend long hours hunting, making them a regular sight throughout the morning and late afternoon. Other regulars include 3 species of diver. Both Red-throated and Black-throated Diver nest in the islands whilst Great Northern Divers can be seen in their superb summer plumage before heading north with small numbers over-summering. Other birds often hanging on from winter include a few Whooper Swans that have occasionally bred whilst more likely wildfowl include Eider, Gadwall, Shoveler and possibly Garganey. Small birds are generally limited to those of open country such as Meadow Pipit and Skylark whilst Corn Bunting still cling on although their numbers have much diminished over the last decade. Occasionally late May is also a time when unusual spring migrant warblers and flycatchers turn up and have included such rarities as Bluethroat, Red-backed Shrike and even an Iberian Chiffchaff in 2009 although these are more the exception than the norm. It's a great time of year to be in the islands and you just never know what you might see.

### **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.

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 and in 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 waders can be found with breeding species including Snipe, Dunlin and a handful of the rare, Red-necked Phalarope. This is their main site in the Outer Hebrides and the last week in May often sees new birds arriving, adding to a peak in activity levels for this charismatic species. Nearby Stinky Bay is always worth a look and regularly holds good numbers of waders including summer plumage Sanderling, Turnstone and Purple Sandpiper. Phalaropes also occasionally fly the short distance across to the bay to feed and although they don't appear to do this every day, when they do, we often get superb views. Eiders gather in the bay, especially at low tide and have included birds resembling the subspecies *borealis* or Northern Eider. Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl occur over the moorland whilst Great Northern Diver and Red-throated Diver should be found along the coast. Corncrakes are fairly common on the west side of Benbecula and with a bit of luck we should be able to find one or two. Other species could include Whimbrel, Curlew Sandpiper, Peregrine and Golden Eagle.

Day 2: This morning we'll head to 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 chance of picking up Long-tailed Skua as well as auks, Fulmars, terns, Manx Shearwater, Kittiwakes and waders. Arctic Terns and waders nest on the headland whilst the shore often holds good numbers of Arctic bound birds which may include a lingering Purple Sandpiper. 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 regularly pick them up along the access roads with birds occasionally seen crossing. 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 runs through the middle of the moorland and provides easy access to moorland breeding specialities. We have a good chance of picking up Hen Harrier, Golden Eagle and Short-eared Owl whilst Merlin, Peregrine, Greenshank and Arctic Skua also occur.

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 and otters. The dramatic scenery of moorland and hills are a great area for birds of prey and all 8 resident species of diurnal raptors are 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 Aird an Runair. This can be another good location for passage waders and seabirds so we'll carefully check both, north and south bays as well as walking out to the point. Otters are regularly seen; seals are common and occasionally we pick up Bottle-nosed Dolphins. We'll

head back north and along the west coast calling in for a short walk at Stoneybridge before finishing the day with a wander around Peninerine and the Howmore River. It's an excellent area for waders and gulls whilst off-shore we should be able to find Great Northern Diver. Corncrakes are quite common in this area whilst otters are also a possibility.

Day 4: This morning we head north to the small island of Berneray that is connected to North Uist via a causeway completed in 2001. The freshwater, Loch Bhrusda lies in the centre of the island and at the northern end is a small pool that regularly attracts more unusual species that have included Little Stint, Ruff and Red-necked Phalarope. Terns regularly congregate here with large colonies of Arctic Terns nesting nearby as well as smaller numbers of Little Terns. A walk across the machair to the north-west side of the island will take us to the Sound of Pabbay where we should hopefully see a variety of seabirds and possibly Common Scoter as well as Great Northern Diver. There's also a chance of seeing Harbour Porpoise from here too, if conditions are calm enough. We'll move on to the north-east side of the island to Rushgarry where we'll scan the shore and sea and hopefully find good numbers of waders and terns. Leaving Berneray we head around the north side of North Uist to Grenitote, stopping en route to look for Golden Eagle and Hen Harrier. At Grenitote we drive down to a tidal area and scan the machair in case a Snowy Owl has taken up residence. This is one of the most frequent sites for Snowy Owl in Uist at this time of year. Unfortunately they are becoming more irregular and generally don't hang around too long. Even if no owls are present we should see good numbers of waders that may include summer plumage Grey Plover and Knot. We finish with a trip across the Committee Road where we should pick up Short-eared Owl and Hen Harrier.

Day 5: Today we head first to Loch Druidibeg to look for Black-throated Diver, Golden Eagle and Hen Harrier. Cuckoos are usually present whilst a small plantation regularly attracts migrants. Other birds could include Merlin and Red-throated Diver whilst continuing to the end of the road we should be able to find Twite and maybe otters. We return to the main road before taking the turning at Stilligarry and explore the western edge of the loch where we should find a good variety of wildfowl. From here we do a loop walk across the machair to the coast and back via the Sand Martin colony on Drimsdale machair. This should provide a good variety of wildfowl and waders as well as Great Northern Diver along the coast. We'll call in at Grogarry Lodge to have a quick look at the trees here that sometimes harbour migrants, before continuing north to Loch Bee. This large loch holds nationally important numbers of Mute Swans but also attracts plenty of other wildfowl and waders. Lapwing, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Snipe, Redshank and Oystercatcher all breed as well as Wigeon and Teal. White-tailed Eagle often venture over to the loch to hunt whilst Peregrine can also be seen. We head around the west side coming out at Ardivachar which regularly holds lots of

migrant waders as does nearby North Bay and Balgarva. The whole area is excellent for migrant waders and we should also see a good variety of ducks, plus Arctic and Little Terns. We may also see Corncrakes as quite a few breed at the north-west end of South Uist. It's also a good time of year to pick up something more unusual as well as possibly a few passaging skuas.

Day 6: On our final day we'll try and pick up anything that we might have missed during the week so the day is flexible but if we already have cleaned up we shall take another look at Loch Eynort where we're sure to enjoy a good variety of raptors as well as Red-throated Diver and maybe otters.

**Dates:** 23<sup>rd</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020

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

**Cost:** £850 per person (£800 per person if 2 sharing a room)

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 from Glasgow to Benbecula although the earlier you book the cheaper the fare. 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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