



**UNITED KINGDOM BIRDING TOUR:
HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS OF SCOTLAND IN SPRING**

GENERAL INFORMATION



*Beautifully adorned **Horned Grebe** breed in the Scottish Highlands.*

TOUR OUTLINE

On this United Kingdom (UK) birdwatching tour, we visit the best birding sites in Scotland to enjoy fantastic European species in their beautiful spring breeding plumage. The tour targets Scotland's iconic wildlife, including the endemic **Red Grouse**, **Corn Crake**, **Red-throated Loon**, **Atlantic Puffin**, **White-tailed Eagle** and mammals such as **Eurasian Red Squirrel** and **Pine Marten**. Throughout the tour we stay in charming hotels, often with wonderful views across the surrounding landscapes, while enjoying welcoming hospitality, hearty Scottish food, and some of the most picturesque scenery in the UK.

We begin the tour in the Scottish capital, Edinburgh, before taking a scenic drive west, stopping at Loch Lomond for **Osprey**, and continuing past forested lochs to Argyll. Here we enjoy some woodland birding before searching for reintroduced **Eurasian Beaver**, before continuing north along the twisting coastline to Oban. We board a ferry for a three-night stay on the Isle of Mull, one of the Inner Hebrides, often accompanied by **Black Guillemot** and other coastal species. Over the next three days we explore the wide landscapes of Mull, including moorland, conifer woodland, isolated beaches, and towering sea cliffs, searching for **Hen Harrier**, **Short-eared Owl**, and **Eurasian Otter**. One day we take a boat trip to visit a nearby **Atlantic Puffin** colony, giving us close views of these charismatic seabirds, and we also hope to see nesting **White-tailed Eagle** while on the water. Another day we visit the tiny island of Iona, arguably the best place in the UK to see **Corn Crake**, and we will also visit the historic abbey grounds where **Twite** are often found.

Departing the Isle of Mull, we travel through the breathtaking Highlands of Scotland to the Cairngorms, where we are based for the next four nights. Here we explore the high mountains in search of **Rock Ptarmigan**, **Ring Ouzel**, and **Snow Bunting**, while in Abernethy Forest we look for **Crested Tit**, **Wood Warbler**, and the endemic **Scottish Crossbill**. The surrounding lochs, valleys, and moorlands hold **Black Grouse**, **Horned Grebe**, and **Golden Eagle**. At night we will visit a wildlife hide in hopes of seeing **Pine Marten**, and possibly **Tawny Owl**. Some of our last birding will be at the Moray Firth coastline where we look for seabirds, waterbirds, shorebirds (waders), and grassland species before heading south where the tour ends in Edinburgh.

DAILY ACTIVITIES, PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS, AND TOUR PACE

The pace of our Scotland in spring birding tour varies. The tour begins with two days of single-night stays and longer journeys in our tour vehicle as we transfer from Edinburgh to Argyll, and then onward to the Isle of Mull. After this we spend three nights on the Isle of Mull, followed by a four-night stay in the Cairngorms, where the pace is slower with less time spent traveling. The tour then ends with a one-night stay while returning to Edinburgh. The itinerary is designed to maximize birding opportunities, and we will try to connect with some incredible yet elusive species such as **Corn Crake** and **Black Grouse**, which require very early starts. We will also search for **Tawny Owl** and **Eurasian Beaver** in the evening and visit a mammal watching hide in hopes of seeing **Pine Marten**, so there are some late finishes during the tour. All night wildlife watching is entirely optional, and anyone who prefers not to join may rest at the hotel. These early starts and late finishes are balanced by slower paced days between them to allow for rest and recovery.

Our days typically begin at around 06:00 hrs., though this will vary depending on the activity. Usually we will have breakfast at the hotel before departing for birding, and mornings following evening activities will have later breakfasts. On some of the busier days, such as the day trip to the

Isle of Iona, we will take a packed breakfast to allow for an early start. Lunches will usually be enjoyed out rather than returning to the hotel, and we will make the most of the excellent cafés found throughout Scotland. On some afternoons we will return to the hotel for a few hours to rest before heading out again. This tour does involve some longer drives, and on certain days we will spend most of the day out birding, using the vehicle as a base, for example when we transfer between Edinburgh and Argyll, and between the Isle of Mull and Aviemore.

Our birdwatching will vary throughout Scotland. At times we will enjoy roadside birding, stopping when we reach interesting habitat, find a target species, or simply to appreciate the stunning landscapes. At other times we will be mainly on foot when exploring larger reserves such as Loch Lomond or Abernethy Forest, or when visiting the Isle of Iona, where all birding will be on foot after leaving the ferry. At times we will also be stationary, either waiting at a hide or scanning the coast for shorebirds (waders). During the tour we will also take several ferries and a marine boat trip, which will give us opportunities to see seabirds and coastal species up close. Please see the ‘Scottish Marine Birdwatching Boat Trip’ section below for more details.

The tour is generally considered easy to moderate in terms of physical effort. The more demanding activities relate either to the length of time spent on foot away from the vehicle, or to walking uphill in the Cairngorm Mountains, or to reach the **Atlantic Puffin** colony. For these activities, walking sticks or hiking poles may be helpful for those who prefer extra stability and are recommended for anyone who feels unsteady on their feet, as your safety is our top priority. Other birding days will be physically easy and largely vehicle or boat-based, with short walks along quiet roads and frequent birding stops.

SPECIES RECORDING (BIRD LISTS AND ANIMAL LISTS)

Ahead of the tour we will email you a detailed daily itinerary complete with meeting/arrival instructions. We will provide you with a printed blank diary page within the itinerary document so that you can note down any names of birding sites that you may want to log. On the first night of the tour you will be provided with a printed version of the same itinerary. Each evening your tour leader will go through this with you to let you know any specifics to be aware of for the following day (e.g. clothes and equipment needed, breakfast time, time for leaving hotel, key target birds we will be looking for, etc.).

Attached to the itinerary document will be a bird list and list of other animals possible on the tour (or a blank list to write them in as we go). We follow the latest IOC (International Ornithological Congress taxonomy) for birds and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for all other animals recorded during the tour so all itineraries and checklists follow these taxonomies.

Each evening we will go through the daily bird and animal lists, logging all the species from the day. The listing session is optional, we realize that some of our clients aren’t fussed about the listing aspect, but others are. If you do not want to take part in the nightly bird list that is perfectly fine, but it is a useful way to remember what was seen during the day, so recommended.

Birding Ecotours leaders maintain eBird checklists from all birding activities during a tour (from unexpected roadside stops to planned birding activities). Tour leaders will share these eBird lists with all participants who use eBird, if desired. Just make sure to provide your eBird user details to the tour leader at the beginning of the tour for us to be able to do this, unfortunately we can’t retrospectively go back and share past checklists after the tour. We will also provide you with an

eBird trip report for the tour where we will add our photos taken on the tour and you are welcome to include your own too.

After the tour you will be emailed a PDF copy of a written trip report, this will be in the form of an illustrated daily diary and will include a complete checklist of all wildlife recorded. If the tour leader manages to get any interesting photographs these will be included in the trip report. Leader photos may also be added to our [Flickr page](#) and will be added into a 'trip report gallery' which you can view, download, and share.

PASSPORT, VISA, AND ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Many visitors to the UK do not require a visa for short tourist visits, but do now need to obtain a UK Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) before travel. This includes citizens of the United States, Canada and Australia. An ETA permits multiple visits to the UK for stays of up to six months at a time and is usually valid for two years. Applications must be completed online before travel and be linked to the passport used for the application. Most ETA applications are approved quickly, often within minutes, though travelers should allow up to three working days for approval. You can use [this link](#) for more information and to apply.

Entry to the UK is generally granted provided you have:

- A passport valid for the entire duration of your stay in the UK
- An approved UK ETA
- A return or onward flight ticket
- Proof of sufficient funds for your stay

Entry and exit rules can change at short notice, so it is essential to check the latest information on the [UK government immigration website](#) before departure. Do not assume you will be eligible to travel without first confirming the current requirements. Please confirm details via your own government's travel advice, see [here](#) for the US, [here](#) for Canada, and [here](#) for Australia. Citizens of other countries should check their own governments' advice and contact their nearest embassies or consulates for the most up-to-date regulations and requirements.

Please make sure that you bring a photocopy of your passport with you on the tour, kept in a different location from your original passport in case of loss or damage. This can be stored with other important documents such as travel insurance details and emergency contact information. Digital copies stored securely online can also be useful.

The UK enforces customs and security regulations. Please review the [relevant customs guidance](#) before travel and check current airline security rules regarding luggage and restricted items.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

As per our standard [Terms and Conditions](#), we strongly recommend that you purchase comprehensive trip cancellation insurance to protect against unexpected events that might cause delays and interruptions to travel. Your insurance should also cover illness, medical issues, accidents, repatriation, loss of luggage or valuable items, flight delays/cancellations, and ideally

medical evacuation included. Failure to purchase adequate insurance could be costly if something unexpected occurs.

HEALTH, VACCINATIONS AND SAFETY

The UK is considered a very safe destination for travelers, with excellent healthcare infrastructure and low risks from infectious diseases or dangerous wildlife. We recommend that you are up to date with routine vaccinations before traveling to the UK, including measles, mumps, and rubella, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, polio, chickenpox, and influenza. No special vaccines are required for travel to the UK, but travelers should review the latest [CDC traveler guidance](#) before departure to ensure routine vaccinations are current.

As per our general [Terms and Conditions](#), please notify us when registering for this tour of any medical conditions that we should be aware of. Medical care in the UK is widely available and throughout most of the tour we will be within reasonable distance of major hospitals in cities such as Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Inverness. While on the Isle of Mull we will be further from larger hospitals, though there are still local medical facilities available on the island. Free treatment through the UK's National Health Service is only available to residents and certain visa holders, and tourists should expect to be charged for medical treatment. As such it is essential that you have comprehensive travel insurance covering medical treatment, hospitalization, and evacuation if required, as many hospitals or clinics may request payment upfront for treatment.

Scotland has very few dangerous animals, but small biting insects and ticks can be a nuisance throughout spring and summer. Midges are common in the Highlands and western coastal regions and can be bothersome, particularly in warmer and calm weather conditions. Ticks may also be present in grassy or wooded habitats and can occasionally transmit diseases such as Lyme disease. We recommend checking for ticks after spending time in grassy or forested areas.

Crime levels in the UK are generally lower than in the [United States](#), and visitors rarely experience serious issues. Petty crime such as pickpocketing or bag snatching can occasionally occur in busy public areas, or at major tourist sites. As in any country, it is sensible to keep valuables out of sight, remain aware of your surroundings in crowded places, and avoid leaving belongings unattended.

FOOD AND WATER

Tap water is safe to drink throughout the UK, and to reduce the amount of plastic waste generated during the tour we recommend bringing a refillable water bottle to take out in the field. Mealtimes will generally fall within normal eating hours, though they may vary depending on our birding and travel plans. If you need to eat at a specific time of day, for example to coincide with medication, you may wish to bring snacks to supplement the meals provided. We will not make regular stops at convenience stores, but there will be opportunities to purchase items when time allows.

Dietary preferences will be well catered for throughout the tour. Scottish cuisine is hearty, often featuring dishes based around locally sourced ingredients such as salmon, lamb, beef, potatoes, and seasonal vegetables. Fresh seafood is widely available along the coast, while traditional meals include soups, stews, and meat dishes served with potatoes or bread. Vegetarian options are also widely available. We typically have breakfast and dinner at our accommodation, with lunch taken

at cafés or restaurants during the day after morning birding. On some occasions we may provide packed breakfasts for convenience.

CURRENCY

The official currency of the UK is the Pound Sterling (GBP). Credit and debit cards, including Visa and MasterCard are widely accepted throughout the UK, and most travelers will find they can pay for nearly everything by card. As such, most clients will not need to carry cash during the tour. If you would prefer to have some cash for minor purchases or gratuities, it is easy to withdraw money from an ATM either at the airport on arrival or later in towns we pass during the tour. A small amount of local cash may be useful for personal expenses not included in the tour costs and for any gratuities. See the full list of what is and is not included in the itinerary document.

WEATHER/CLIMATE

Scotland forms the northern part of the UK and is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea, and the Irish Sea. Its high northern latitude, combined with varied topography including mountains, glens, islands, and extensive coastlines results in a cool temperate maritime climate. We visit Scotland in late May and early June, the best period for birding when days are long and temperatures are generally mild and comfortable. Average daytime temperatures during this period typically range from around 54 to 66°F (12 to 19°C), while evenings are noticeably cooler, usually dropping to around 45 to 52°F (7 to 11°C). In the Cairngorm Mountains we will reach elevations of 3,600 feet (1,097 meters) or more, where temperatures may fall to around 39°F (4°C) and winds can make conditions feel colder. Weather in Scotland can change quickly, and it is likely that we will encounter some rain at some point during the tour, so visitors should be prepared for a mix of sunshine, cloud, wind, and occasional rain.

ELECTRICITY AND COMMUNICATION

The power plug sockets in the UK are Type G, which are also used in Ireland, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Kenya, and several other countries. The standard voltage in the UK is 230 volts (V) and the standard frequency is 50 hertz (Hz). Further details can be found here.

Adaptors will likely be needed for visitors from overseas. Most modern electronic devices such as phone chargers, laptops, and camera battery chargers are designed to operate on a wide voltage range (typically 100-240 V), meaning they will only require a simple plug adaptor to be used safely in the UK. If you plan to bring appliances that only operate on 100-127 V (as is common in the US, Canada, and parts of South America), you may require a voltage converter in addition to a plug adaptor.

All hotels we use have Wi-Fi, and mobile phone coverage is generally good near towns and urban areas but can be patchy when we are on the islands and in the mountains. For those wishing to purchase an electronic SIM card for the tour, the mobile network EE typically provides good coverage throughout Scotland.

TRANSPORTATION AND LUGGAGE

We will use a 9-seater minivan throughout the tour, allowing everyone to have a window seat. When transferring between hotels, your luggage will travel with us in the back of the vehicle. A medium-sized, soft-sided, and robust duffel bag is likely to be the best option for the tour. You will be expected to load and unload your own bags as we move between locations during the tour.

SCOTTISH MARINE BIRDWATCHING BOAT TRIP

Our Scotland tour includes an exciting six-hour marine wildlife watching boat trip departing from Tobermory harbor. During this trip we hope to see seabirds such as **Great Skua**, **Northern Gannet**, gulls, terns, and **White-tailed Eagle**, as well as cetaceans such as **Common Minke Whale**. We will visit the small Treshnish Isles, home to a colony of charismatic **Atlantic Puffin**, along with many other breeding seabirds. We will disembark and walk a short distance uphill to the colony (approx. 15-minute slow walk), and spend around two hours on land enjoying close views of the breeding seabirds. We will have a packed lunch on the islands, and the boat has toilet facilities on board. Please also refer to the ‘What to take on the boat trip’ section below.

The boat trip explores sheltered coastal waters between the islands, so sea conditions are usually calm and the trip normally proceeds as planned. On rare occasions, unfavorable weather or sea conditions may mean the trip cannot go ahead. If the trip cannot run, we will instead spend additional time exploring the beautiful Isle of Mull. If you prefer not to take part in the marine boat trip, you may remain at our accommodation and enjoy some relaxed birding or free time around Tobermory.

In addition to this boat trip, we take two return ferry crossings during the tour. One is a car ferry from Oban on the mainland to Craignure on the Isle of Mull, and the other is a passenger ferry for our day trip to the Isle of Iona. These crossings provide excellent wildlife watching opportunities, and we will keep an eye out for species such as **Black Guillemot** and **Harbor Porpoise**.

ACCOMMODATION

We use good quality hotels and bed and breakfasts throughout our time in Scotland, most of which are small independent properties with plenty of character and charm. All accommodations have private en-suite bathrooms with hot water, 24-hour electricity, Wi-Fi, and heating. Laundry services are available at some of the larger hotels we use.

Occasionally we may need to use alternative accommodation to our preferred choices for reasons beyond our control, but we will provide a full list of accommodation details ahead of the tour. At Birding Ecotours we use a good standard of hotel and room for our birding tours, and these are well received by our participants. If you would like to upgrade to a higher category of room, such as a superior or luxury option, this may be possible in some locations depending on availability. Please note there will be an additional charge for room upgrades, and we recommend contacting us as early as possible to discuss the available options.

WHAT TO BRING:

Clothing

In Scotland the weather is generally mild but can change quickly, so layered clothing works best. Quick-drying clothes in muted colors are ideal, and bringing several layers will allow you to adjust to changing conditions throughout the day. Mornings can be cool, particularly when birding in the mountains or along the coast, so a warm layer such as a fleece or jumper is essential. A waterproof jacket is also strongly advised, as rain is likely at some point during the tour.

Long pants and long-sleeved shirts are useful both for warmth and for protection against biting insects. Light-colored clothing may help deter midges, and wearing socks pulled up over your pants can help create a barrier against insects and ticks when walking through grassy or wooded areas. We recommend bringing two pairs of footwear – walking shoes or lightweight hiking boots for birding, and a second pair of comfortable shoes for travel days, allowing your main footwear to dry if conditions are wet.

Equipment

Binoculars and a camera are highly recommended. A telescope is not necessary, as your guide will carry a good scope throughout the tour. If you are unsteady on your feet or concerned about uneven ground, a walking stick or hiking pole is strongly recommended and may be essential when birding in the Cairngorm Mountains or Abernethy Forest. We will spend several evenings searching for Scotland's elusive mammals and **Tawny Owl**, so a flashlight or headlamp will be helpful for moving around after dark. A small daypack and reusable water bottle is also recommended.

Insect repellent is strongly advised, as midges can be bothersome, particularly in the evenings and in damp forested areas. Some participants may also wish to bring a head net. A dry bag can help protect valuables and camera equipment during our boat trip or in the event of heavy rain. Carrying a small personal first aid kit may also be worthwhile for minor cuts, blisters, or insect bites.

What to take on the boat trip

Weather can change quickly at sea. As we will be traveling in a partially covered boat, it can feel cool and breezy even on otherwise mild days, so a warm layer and a waterproof jacket are advisable. Sunglasses can also be helpful, as glare off the water can be bright when conditions are sunny. Footwear should be comfortable and practical, such as walking shoes or lightweight hiking shoes with good grip, to help when getting on and off the boat and when walking up to the **Atlantic Puffin** colony. A protective cover for binoculars and camera equipment can also be useful in case of sea spray or light rain. Although sea conditions are usually calm in the sheltered waters where we travel, those who are prone to seasickness may wish to bring suitable medication as a precaution.

FIELD GUIDES

The Collins Bird Guide (Svensson, Mullarney, and Zetterström, 2023) is by far the best field guide for Scotland, and all of Europe. It is widely regarded as the standard reference for bird identification in the Western Palearctic, and covers all species likely to be encountered on this Scotland tour. The guide features exceptionally clear and detailed illustrations, showing multiple plumages and flight views, with concise text and distribution maps placed alongside the plates, making it very effective for use in the field. The main drawback is its size and weight, but the Collins Bird Guide is also available as a mobile app, which many will prefer as it provides the same high-quality illustrations and information without the need to carry the physical book.

The Field Guide to Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East (Aulagnier, Haffner, Mitchell-Jones, Moutou, and Zima, 2025) is an excellent reference for anyone interested in the mammals encountered on this tour. It provides clear and authoritative species accounts covering identification, habitat, behavior, and distribution, supported by high-quality illustrations and detailed range maps. It is best regarded as a reference guide rather than a field guide to carry while birding, and is ideal for use in the vehicle or for evening study.

Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Britain and Europe (Speybroeck, Beukema, Bok, and Van Der Voort, 2018) is the most up to date and comprehensive field guide to the amphibians and reptiles of Europe. It covers around 220 species with useful identification text, excellent color illustrations, photographs, and detailed distribution maps. While these groups are not a major focus of our Scotland tour, this guide is an excellent reference for anyone interested in the herpetofauna of Britain and Europe.

USEFUL APPS AND WEBSITE RESOURCES

Merlin – an app that can help you identify birds by sight (from photos) and sound (from recordings) and is a useful tool to aid bird identification. The app is being expanded all the time with new data and regional information so is worth keeping an eye on. We recommend downloading the Middle East pack for this tour.

eBird – there is a wealth of information contained on this website and the mobile app is now excellent and useful too. Photo, video, and sound galleries are available for practically every species in the world through The Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Macaulay Library.

Aves Vox – a good app that enables the downloading of bird songs and calls from the xeno-canto website onto your cell phone.

IOC World Bird List – this website contains all the latest details on the world of global bird taxonomy. You can read about newly described species, splits (creation of a new species) and lumps (deletion of a species) of existing species, and plenty of other important information.

Birds of the world – a brilliant website that contains information for all global bird species, with information on identification, distribution, habitat, behavior and more. While the site is less useful for species identification than a field guide, it provides a detailed overview alongside photographs, maps, videos and audio recordings.