



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

27 MAY – 06 JUNE 2027



*We hope to see the United Kingdom's endemic **Red Grouse** while birding in the Scottish Highlands.*

Scotland forms the northernmost part of the United Kingdom (UK) and is fringed by hundreds of islands around its coast (mainly the north and west coasts). Scotland offers a range of habitats that are rare or absent elsewhere in the UK, including high alpine and mountain landscapes, expansive upland heather moorland, vast inaccessible coastal cliffs ideal for seabirds, and large ancient Caledonian pine forests. Combining this with comfortable accommodation throughout, vibrant culture, breathtaking landscapes, and amazing wildlife encounters, Scotland is a truly exciting prospect for birdwatchers.

The UK endemic **Scottish Crossbill** is found exclusively in Scotland while **Red Grouse**, a more widespread UK endemic, can be easily seen in Scotland. This small-group spring birding tour begins and ends in the historic Scottish capital, Edinburgh, and is perfectly timed to coincide with the return of many migratory species and the peak of the breeding season for a wide range of birds. This Scottish bird tour links up perfectly with our preceding England in Spring birding tour.

Our Highlands and Islands of Scotland in Spring birding tour starts in Edinburgh, we then transfer through breathtaking landscapes towards the Inner Hebrides (along the west coast). On our way, we will get to grips with some of the more common species found throughout Scotland, such as **Common Eider**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Eurasian Whimbrel**, **European Robin**, **Coal Tit**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, and **Common Reed Bunting**, while targeting **Osprey**, **Red Squirrel**, and **Eurasian Beaver**. We then have three nights on the amazing Isle of Mull, one of the Inner Hebrides, where we will target a long list of outstanding species, many rare within northwest Europe. Top targets include **Golden Eagle**, **White-tailed Eagle**, **Hen Harrier**, **Short-eared Owl**, **Atlantic Puffin**, **Black Guillemot**, **Common Loon** (Great Northern Diver), **Corn Crake**, **Twite**, **Eurasian Otter**, and cetaceans such as **Harbor Porpoise** and **Common Bottlenose Dolphin**. As part of our time on Mull we will visit the quaint Isle of Iona and its white sand beaches, and enjoy a boat cruise to look for seabirds.



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

The second half of the tour takes place in the Scottish Highlands, where we explore dramatic landscapes ranging from alpine environments to ancient pine forests and picturesque lochs (lakes) of the Cairngorms National Park. Up in the mountains we seek high-altitude breeders such as **Rock Ptarmigan**, **Eurasian Dotterel**, and breeding plumage **Snow Bunting**, while in the lush forests below, species like **Crested Tit**, **Wood Warbler**, **European Pied** and **Spotted Flycatchers**, **White-throated Dipper**, **Scottish** and **Red Crossbills**, and **Pine Marten**. Taking a break from the Cairngorms, we visit remote lochs and glens (narrow valleys) for **Horned Grebe**, **Red-throated Loon**, **Common Goldeneye**, and we have more chances for **Golden** and **White-tailed Eagles**, before targeting waterfowl, seabirds, and wading birds along the coast of the Moray Firth. We conclude our tour by focusing on specialist heather moorland species such as **Red Grouse**, **Black Grouse**, and **Merlin**, before transferring south again to Edinburgh.



Rock Ptarmigan is a subtly beautiful species, and a major tour target while we explore the Cairngorms Mountains.

Scotland has long been a favorite destination for birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts, offering dramatic landscapes, rich cultural traditions, and excellent birding and wildlife experiences across the country. From historic castles and tartan to world-famous whisky, Scotland provides an unforgettable setting for a birding holiday. We also recommend extending your stay in Edinburgh to experience some of what this fascinating city offers. This tour can be combined with our England birding tour immediately before this Scotland trip.

Itinerary (11 days/ 10 nights)

Day 1. Arrival to Edinburgh Airport

A non-birding day, with your arrival into Edinburgh Airport. The rest of the day will be at your leisure. We will meet in our hotel near the airport for a welcome dinner together in the evening. If you have just taken part in our England in Spring birding tour, we will arrive at the hotel in the early afternoon and you will have the afternoon at leisure.

Overnight: Dakota Edinburgh, Edinburgh, or similar

Day 2. Loch Lomond, and travel to Argyll

We will drive west and north of Edinburgh to Crinan, in Argyll. This drive will take most of the day, with frequent birding stops and time to admire the breathtaking landscapes — lush woodlands, picturesque lochs (lakes), and quaint villages nestled among towering emerald hills. We will begin birding en route, and we will know we have arrived in true Scotland when roadside **Carrion Crows** are replaced by **Hooded Crows**.

Our first main stop will be at the largest freshwater loch in Scotland, Loch Lomond, which stretches 24 miles (39 km) in length. We will visit the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Loch Lomond reserve, and our main target here will be **Osprey**, which, after becoming extinct in the UK in the early 1900s, returned to breed in 1954. We should also encounter common and widespread species such as **Mute Swan**, **Common Merganser**, and songbirds including **Eurasian Magpie**, **Barn Swallow**, **Western House Martin**, **Eurasian Wren**, **Common Blackbird**, **Mistle Thrush**, **European Robin**, **White Wagtail**, **European Goldfinch**, and **Common Reed Bunting**.

Continuing towards Crinan, we will stop at several lochs to search for **Common Eider**, **Common Shelduck**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, and **Grey Heron**. In coastal areas, we will look for shorebirds (waders) and seabirds such as **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, **Eurasian Whimbrel**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Common Redshank**, **Common Tern**, and gulls including **Black-headed**, **Common**, **European Herring**, **Lesser Black-backed**, and **Great Black-backed Gulls**. We aim to arrive at our comfortable hotel with time to explore the local area, where good birding is possible nearby. Over dinner, we will enjoy stunning views across the bay towards the Inner Hebrides.

Overnight: Crinan Hotel, Argyll, or similar



*The large **Mistle Thrush** is a common species seen in Scotland and has a distinctive call.*

Day 3. Argyll Beaver Centre, and birding the Isle of Mull

In the early morning, we will visit the delightful [Argyll Beaver Centre](#). Here, we hope to encounter the reintroduced **Eurasian Beaver** and enjoy close views of the characterful **Red Squirrel**, along with many woodland bird species such as **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Coal Tit**, **Great Tit**, **Eurasian Blue Tit**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, **Song Thrush**, and **Eurasian Siskin**. Wetter areas and surrounding scrub may host migratory warblers too, with **Sedge**, **Common Grasshopper**, **Willow**, **Garden Warblers**, **Common Chiffchaff**, and **Eurasian Blackcap** all possible. This will surely be an early tour highlight, as the Beaver Centre is a peaceful place to spend time.

Later in the morning we will drive north, through dramatic scenery, to board the ferry from Oban to the Isle of Mull, the second-largest island in the Inner Hebrides and our destination for the next three nights. The ferry crossing is an event in itself, with **Black Guillemot** and **Common Eider** often seen at the harbor, and **Common Murre**, **Black-legged Kittiwake**, **Common Gull**, **Arctic Tern**, **Common Tern**, **Northern Gannet**, **Great Cormorant**, and **European Shag** regularly encountered during the journey. There is also a good chance of spotting **Manx Shearwater** or a cetacean such as **Harbor Porpoise**.

Once we dock at Craignure, we drive north towards Tobermory, Mull's colorful capital. We will bird along Mull's long and spectacular coastline, searching in particular for **White-tailed Eagle** and **Eurasian Otter**. Other species we are likely to encounter include **Common Loon**, **Common Shelduck**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Common Cuckoo**, **Common Ringed Plover**, **Northern Lapwing**, **Eurasian Skylark**, **Common Whitethroat**, **Meadow**, **European Rock**, and **Tree Pipits**, and **Common Linnet**. On arrival in Tobermory, famed for its painted buildings and picturesque harbor, we check in to our plush hotel for a three-night stay.

Overnight: [Harbour Guest House, Isle of Mull](#), or similar



We will look for stylish **Black Guillemot**, or Tysties as they are known locally, while on the ferry between Oban and the Isle of Mull.



The breeding plumage of **Common Loon** is stunning!

Day 4. Seabird boat cruise

We have an exciting day ahead. With an early departure, our group will board a boat cruise from Tobermory Harbor. Here, we will seek the brilliant **Atlantic Puffin**, which, at this time of year, breeds on nearby rock stacks and will be sporting its colorful beak. Aside from puffins, there are many other targets we hope to encounter on the trip, such as **Parasitic Jaeger**, **Great Skua**, **Razorbill**, **Common Murre**, **Northern Fulmar**, **Manx Shearwater**, **Northern Gannet**, **Common Loon**, **Arctic** and **Common Terns**, and six species of gull. We also have a chance of **White-tailed Eagle** and **Osprey** from the boat, and could encounter **Grey** or **Harbor Seals**, and cetaceans such as **Common Minke Whale**, and **Common** or **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**.

Once on dry land, we will have some down time before venturing out again, exploring Mull's diverse landscapes, from its rugged mountains and rolling moorland to its sandy beaches. Our main target for the afternoon will be the impressive **Golden Eagle**, a brilliant species that can be found at a few locations on Mull. We will make a special effort to visit some of these. We will also be on the lookout for many other species, such as those listed as targets for the afternoon on Day 3.

Overnight: Harbour Guest House, Isle of Mull, or similar



*We hope to get close to the characterful **Atlantic Puffin** on a boat trip off the Isle of Mull.*



***European Shag** is a beautiful species when you see it up close!*

Day 5. Birding the Isle of Iona

With an early start, we travel to Mull's southwest tip to catch a ferry to the Isle of Iona. This small island is best known for its early Christian monastery and its tranquil white sand beaches. Our journey will be well timed, as our main target on Iona, the **Corn Crake**, is perhaps the hardest bird we hope to connect with on the tour. Though they breed in good numbers on Iona they are super-secretive and we may only hear their distinctive crex crex call – hence their scientific name of *Crex crex*. We will certainly try our best to see one of these elusive birds in the hay and silage fields, or iris beds on the isle. We will likely visit the Abbey and Nunnery, one of Scotland's most sacred sites, as the area around it is great for **Twite**, and holds a population of hybrid Rock and Feral Doves, which are unfortunately not pure **Rock Doves** even though they look almost identical to them!

Once back on Mull, we will take a more leisurely journey back to Tobermory, where we plan to bird some of the best habitat on Mull. In particular, we will be looking for **White-tailed Eagle**, **Hen Harrier**, **Short-eared Owl**, and **Eurasian Otter**, among the more common species.

Overnight: Harbour Guest House, Isle of Mull, or similar



The Isle of Mull is an excellent place to see White-tailed Eagle.



Twite is a tiny finch and it is rare in Scotland, confined only to high elevations or remote islands, but there is a healthy population on the Isle of Iona.

Day 6. Departure from Mull and travel to the Highlands

We will have a more relaxed morning after our early start the previous day. After breakfast we will slowly travel south towards the ferry port, birding Mull along the way. We will focus on any remaining targets, which, due to their low abundance, may include **Golden** or **White-tailed Eagles**, **Hen Harrier**, or **Short-eared Owl**. We will have another opportunity to see **Black Guillemot** on the ferry to the mainland, before beginning our transfer to the beautiful Cairngorms National Park.

The journey will take most of the afternoon, as we travel slowly across the breathtaking Scottish Highlands and birdwatch along the way. This is a vast and sparsely populated region, characterized by dramatic landscapes made up of rugged mountains, glistening lochs, and remote glens which are a haven for some of the United Kingdom's rarest wildlife. On the journey, we will keep a lookout for **Osprey**, **Common Goldeneye**, **Eurasian Curlew**, **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, and the UK endemic **Red Grouse**. Our hotel for the next four nights is on the edge of a town nestled on the River Spey, a place well known for its whisky distilleries and excellent access to some of the best birding sites in the Cairngorms.

Overnight: The Speyside Hotel, Grantown-On-Spey, or similar



*We will target **Eurasian Dotterel** at the top of the Cairngorms Mountain.*

Day 7. Montane birding in the Cairngorms

As one of Scotland's highest plateaus, the Cairngorm Mountains boast a number of alpine species that are rare elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Under the shadow of Cairn Gorm, the 4,084 feet (1,244 meter) peak that gives the range its name, we will spend the full day birding this tundra-

like environment. We will target the alpine breeders found here, such as **Rock Ptarmigan**, **Red Grouse**, **Eurasian Dotterel**, **Ring Ouzel**, **Northern Wheatear**, **Snow Bunting**, and **Mountain Hare**. We plan to board Scotland's only funicular railway, which will take us from the base station to the very appropriately named Ptarmigan Station at 3,600 feet (1,097 meters). From here, we will be well within the range of our target species. Aside from the birding, the panoramic views across the valleys below are breathtaking. This day will certainly be a highlight of the tour, and we will toast our birding successes at the UK's highest restaurant at Ptarmigan Station.

Overnight: The Speyside Hotel, Grantown-On-Spey, or similar



Birding Ecotours
Dominic Rollinson

Snow Bunting is beautiful in its summer plumage.

Day 8. Abernethy Forest and an evening of mammal watching

We have a full day exploring the Abernethy National Nature Reserve, one of the largest remaining remnants of the ancient Caledonian Pine Forest. We will visit the RSPB's Loch Garten reserve. This picturesque freshwater loch, in the heart of Abernethy Forest, is surrounded by stunning Caledonian pinewood landscapes and became famous as the successful reintroduction site of **Osprey** to Scotland in the 1950s. Here, and along other trails through the Abernethy Forest, we will search for **Crested Tit**, **Wood Warbler**, **Eurasian Treecreeper**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, **European Pied** and **Spotted Flycatchers**, **White-throated Dipper**, **Common Redstart**, **Tree Pipit**, **Eurasian Siskin**, **Redpoll**, and both **Scottish** and **Red Crossbills**, the former being Scotland's only endemic bird species (Red Grouse is more widespread in the UK). We may also come across the charming **Red Squirrel** and, if we are incredibly lucky, we might happen upon a rogue **Western Capercaillie**, though we will not be targeting them, as they are now extremely rare in Scotland and unfortunately close to extinction as a UK breeding species.

After some time to relax at our comfortable hotel near Aviemore, we will return to a hide in the forest this evening to watch for nocturnal wildlife such as **Eurasian Badger** and **Pine Marten**. We will also look for **Tawny Owl** and **Eurasian Woodcock** after leaving the hide.

Overnight: The Speyside Hotel, Grantown-On-Spey, or similar



*There are three crossbill species possible in the forests around Abernethy, and while we hope to find the rare endemic **Scottish Crossbill** and the rare in the UK **Parrot Crossbill**, the **Red Crossbill** (pictured here) is more abundant.*

Day 9. Exploring the lochs, valleys, and coast of the Scottish Highlands

After our late night, we will have a slower start to the morning. After breakfast we will travel north to the remote Loch Ruthven, a stronghold for **Red-throated Loon** and **Horned Grebe**, both of which look beautiful at this time of year in their breeding plumage. Depending on our success with birds of prey, we may then opt to visit the dramatic Findhorn Valley. This glacially carved valley with its steep-sided cliffs, is not only an impressive sight, but is also home to **Golden Eagle**, **White-tailed Eagle**, **Osprey**, and **Red Kite**.

This afternoon, we will take a break from Scottish Highland birding and visit the coast at the inlet of the Moray Firth near Inverness. This area, characterized by tidal flats, sandy shores, and rolling dunes, is excellent for waterbirds such as gulls, terns, herons, shorebirds (waders), and ducks, and is famous for its very active **Common Bottlenose Dolphin** population, which feeds close to the shore. Species we could add to our growing trip list here include **Common Shelduck**, **Eurasian Teal**, **Tufted Duck**, **Eurasian Wigeon**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Red Knot**, **Dunlin**, and perhaps a lingering **Pink-footed Goose** or **Long-tailed Duck** from the winter. In addition to the waterbirds, the surrounding fields offer a chance to see some grassland species such as **Rook**, **Eurasian Tree**

Sparrow, European Greenfinch, Corn Bunting, and Yellowhammer. After a varied day of birding, we will return to our accommodation for our final night based near Aviemore.

Overnight: The Speyside Hotel, Grantown-On-Spey, or similar



Red-throated Loon breed on Lochs throughout the Scottish Highlands.

Day 10. Birding in the Scottish Highlands

This morning will be spent visiting the heather moorland that dominates much of the uplands in this area, with our main targets being **Merlin**, and **Red and Black Grouse**. The lekking season of the **Black Grouse** will likely be coming to an end, but we may be lucky and find a few displaying males. After trying for Grouse, we will visit a loch where **Black-throated Loon** (Arctic Diver) breed. These beautiful loons are the third species we try for during this Scotland tour.

The remainder of this penultimate day will be flexible, with a wide variety of options available to us. Should we have missed any notable birds in Abernethy Forest or at the top of the Cairngorms Mountain, we will return to these areas or try alternative sites. **Rock Ptarmigan**, for example, can be tricky, and we may choose to try another alpine area to the south if we have yet to encounter it. Alternatively, given the excellent birding throughout the Scottish Highlands, we may explore new sites, such as a marshland, as we travel south. Whatever we decide, time will be put to good use, as there are many excellent birds still possible.

Overnight: The Inn on the Tay, Pitlochry, or similar



*We will target the smart looking **Black Grouse** while staying near Aviemore.*

Day 11. Transfer to Edinburgh

A non-birding day. Following a spectacular week and a half, the tour will conclude at noon after we transfer back to Edinburgh Airport.

Please note, we ask that you try to book flights out of Edinburgh after 3 pm, to allow for the necessary travel time (at least two hours to the airport) and flight check-in formalities. Please discuss flight times with us before you book anything. You might like to also consider extending your stay to explore Edinburgh city.

Overnight: Not included

Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling or other factors.

Duration: 11 days

Group Size: 4 - 5

Dates: 27 May - 06 June 2027

Start: Edinburgh Airport, Scotland

End: Edinburgh Airport, Scotland

Prices: GBP£6,000 per person sharing – based on 4 - 5 participants

Single Supplements: GBP£1,260

Price includes:

Expert tour leader

Meals (from evening meal on Day 1 until breakfast on Day 11)

Accommodation based on two sharing (Day 1 to Day 10, as shown)

All entrance fees to parks, nature reserves, bird blinds/hides, etc.

All land- and boat-based transport while on tour

Airport transfer at beginning of tour (organized by hotel at Heathrow Airport, London)

Airport drop off at end of the tour (we will drop you off at Edinburgh Airport when the tour ends)

Tolls

Price excludes:

Flights (arrival and departure from Edinburgh)

Airport transfers if you arrive before the tour starts or departs after the tour ends

Visas if required

Any pre- or post-tour accommodation, meals, or birding/sightseeing/monument excursions

Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts, laundry, internet access, phone calls, etc.

Alcoholic, soft drinks, teas, coffees etc. unless provided as part of a meal package (e.g. with breakfast)

Water (tap water in the UK is fine for drinking so we do not provide bottled water on this tour)

Personal insurance

Gratuities (please see our [tipping guidelines blog](#))