



VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

ITINERARY

SCOTLAND NATURE AND CULTURE IN THE HIGHLANDS

MAY 28–JUNE 7, 2026

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Urquhart Castle, on the shores of beautiful Loch Ness. Photo Dean Stewman

Based in a single four-star hotel just minutes from the center of historic Inverness, our tour offers a delicious taste of the enormously varied cultural natural and cultural landscapes of the Scottish Highlands. Our eight days of excursions include not only excellent birding, but expertly guided visits to castles, battlefields, and other fascinating sites of historical significance.



The scenery here in the Highlands is the most dramatic in the British Isles: soaring mountain peaks, remote moorlands, ancient Caledonian forests, stunning ocean cliffs, deep lochs, rugged islands, and famously crystalline rivers. We will be on the lookout for such specialties as the Red Grouse, Black Grouse, Rock Ptarmigan, Arctic and Red-throated Loons, Crested Tit, and Ring Ouzel. Among the raptors we hope to see are the striking Red Kite, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, and Golden Eagle.

The lushness of Highland nature has provided the backdrop over the centuries to many of the most important events in the history of Britain. Cawdor Castle, on a site fortified since at least the twelfth century, has been home to a single Scots family for more than 600 years. Over those tumultuous centuries, the castle has witnessed feuds, kidnappings, and even murders—though it is, alas, only poetic license that identifies Cawdor as the scene of Duncan’s murder and Macbeth’s madness.

Just a few miles away is Culloden. It was here, on a dank morning in April 1746, that the British army routed the Jacobite forces seeking a Stuart restoration. A small and extremely well-designed museum explains the background before our guide takes us out onto the vast battlefield itself, where in less than two hours some 2000 men were killed or wounded; the

slaughter continued for days afterward, when rebel soldiers and sympathizers were hunted down and killed on the moors and in the villages.



A nineteenth-century marker on the battlefield of Culloden. Photo Rick Wright

Fort George, commanding the entrance to Moray Firth, was founded after the battle of Culloden to forestall any further Jacobite attempts to invade Scotland. This enormous installation is still an active military base, the home of the famous Black Watch. The splendid museum traces the history of the Highland Regiments from 1746 to the present, with an unparalleled collection of arms and other artifacts.

We also plan to visit Urquhart Castle, perhaps the most evocative ruin in Scotland, towering over Strone Point the northwestern shore of atmospheric Loch Ness. A drawbridge takes us across the deep moat and into the monumental remains of one of the largest castles ever built; the preserved structures, which include towers, gates, and fragments of a dovecote, date from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

Of course, we will find it impossible to ignore the stunning natural surroundings of these and the other cultural and historic sites we visit. While much of our birding will be planned around

certain “special” birds, Scotland is home to many other, more widespread species of particular interest to those of us new to European birding. Among them are the Common Shelduck, Little Grebe, Eurasian Curlew, and a whole suite of colorful tits, finches, and chats. On our visits to the coast, we might encounter a Pink-footed Goose, European Golden Plover, or Eurasian Oystercatcher, while scenic oceanside cliffs are the nesting site of Atlantic Puffins, Razorbills, Common Murres, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Northern Fulmars, and Northern Gannets.



European Greenfinch. Photo Rick Wright

We will also have opportunities to look for a number of mammal species, among them the shy Pine Marten, European Badger, European and Mountain Hares, Eurasian Red Squirrel, and Red and Roe Deer. Harbor and Gray Seals, Bottle-nosed Dolphins, and Harbor Porpoises may also be encountered on our visits to estuaries and ocean.

We have kept our day-to-day plans flexible, allowing us to take full advantage of local birding updates and to accommodate any adverse weather.



The Red Grouse is now recognized as a Scottish endemic species. © Andrew Whittaker

May 28, Day 1: Travel to Inverness, Scotland. Most transatlantic flights from the United States depart in the late afternoon or evening and arrive the following morning at a European hub city with connections to Inverness Airport (airport code INV). If you are concerned about the length of the international flight and the adjustment to a new time zone, we recommend that you arrive a day or two early to rest and fall into the local rhythm; given enough notice, the VENT office will be happy to help you make arrangements.

NIGHT: In transit (overnight flight)

May 29, Day 2: Arrival in Inverness. Participants should arrive in Inverness on May 29. Our group transfer to our four-star hotel will depart at approximately 3:00 pm; if schedules require it, a private transfer can also be arranged.

It is a short drive of 15 minutes to our base for the tour, the elegant Kingsmills Hotel. The Kingsmills combines quiet and seclusion with an excellent location: the hotel is a five-minute drive from Inverness Castle and the captivating Victorian Market, while a leisurely half hour's stroll takes us to the city's 19th-century cathedral and the historic Eden Court theatre.

After checking in to our hotel, we will have a chance to settle in, unpack, and have a relaxed drink before dinner in the hotel's restaurant.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness



Photo Kingsmills Hotel

May 30, Day 3: Black Isle and Chanonry Point. After a hearty Scottish breakfast, we'll set out on the 30-minute drive to the picturesque Black Isle area. Red Kites, hunted to extinction in England and Scotland, have been re-introduced, with impressive results, and the peninsula of Black Isle is a noted hotspot for watching these magnificent birds. From the large, comfortable blind at Udale Bay, we will keep an eye out for otters and a wide assortment of roosting birds on the marsh. Oystercatchers, Common Shelducks, and Common Gulls often gather here in large numbers, and Udale is a good place to look for lingering winterers such as Pink-footed Geese, almost all of which have left Scotland for their arctic breeding grounds.

Chanonry Point extends more than a mile into the Moray Firth, the largest North Sea inlet in Scotland. The lighthouse here was designed by Alan Stevenson and completed in 1846, four years before the birth of the well-known engineer's better-known nephew Robert Louis. A few steps from the lighthouse are a memorial to the Brahan Seer, who may or may not have lived in Black Isle in the seventeenth century and may or may not have been burned alive in a barrel of tar on this spot.

The bay here is good for Common Eider, Black-legged Kittiwakes, and Common Murres, but Chanonry Point is best known as one of the most rewarding sites in the UK for watching cetaceans. Moray Firth's famously outsized bottle-nosed dolphins make up one of the northernmost populations of that species, and harbor porpoises can be common here. Minke and other whales are also seen in the firth on occasion, as are harbor and gray seals.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness

May 31, Day 4: Loch Garten and Culloden. Something less than an hour from our hotel, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' Loch Garten Reserve is famous as the site where Ospreys returned to

Britain after an absence of nearly a century. In addition to admiring the breeding Ospreys, we will spend some time watching the feeders at the visitor center, which are frequented by Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Eurasian Siskins, and Great, Eurasian Blue, and Coal Tits; other woodland birds we will be looking for here include the Eurasian Treecreeper, Spotted Flycatcher, and Chiffchaff.

The ancient Caledonian pines and bogs of the Highlands are the home of Britain's only Crested Tits, and Loch Garten is a very good site for this charming little chickadee. Another of our prime objectives here is the Scottish Crossbill, recognized by some authorities as a full species endemic to the British Isles. Mammals such as the Eurasian red squirrel and short-tailed field vole are present, and there is always the chance of encountering an otter.

We will turn back west for lunch at Culloden, site of the last pitched battle on British soil, fought on these bleak moors in April 1746. The defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie and his Jacobites marked the beginning of the end for an independent Scotland and its clan system, and dashed for all time the hopes for a restoration of the Stuart dynasty to the British throne. An outstanding small museum and guided tour will teach us more about this pivotal moment in British history. Out on the vast battlefield itself, we are likely to enjoy European Stonechats, Reed Buntings, and Willow and Sedge Warblers, while Skylarks sing high above us, just as they did on that spring day in 1746.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness



Chanonry Point. Photo Colin Smith

June 1, Day 5: Lochindorb and Speyside. With an eye to what will likely be a relatively late evening, we'll start a bit later this morning to drive out over the wild moors to the wonderfully scenic freshwater lake of Lochindorb, an hour east of Inverness near Speyside. The ruined castle on an inaccessible island was once ruled by the notorious Wolf of Badenoch; today, it makes an evocative backdrop to our search for breeding Red-throated Loons, Common Redshank, Dunlin, and Common Gulls. The moorland above the lake is home to Graylag Geese, Red Grouse, and the often reclusive but usually noisy Common Cuckoo.

After dinner this evening, we will set out on a visit to a comfortable heated blind for a chance to see some of the area's more reclusive mammals. The handsome European badger is the most likely to appear, typically about an hour after sunset, but there is also the chance that a scarce pine marten or an even rarer European wildcat might drop in. While we wait, we may see roe or red deer, bank voles, or wood mice; Song Thrushes, European Blackbirds, and other enthusiastic singers will likely still be noisy when we leave the blind, typically shortly after 11:00 pm. This is an optional outing, but one we have always enjoyed in spite of the late hour.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness



Highland Folk Museum. Photo Sara Buck



Northern Gannets at Troup Head RSPB Nature Reserve © Andrew Whittaker

June 2, Day 6: The Cairngorm Mountains and the Highlands Folk Museum. Covering some 1750 square miles, Cairngorms National Park is the largest in the UK, and a morning here is always a highlight of any visit to this part of Scotland. At lower elevations, we will be on the lookout for Ring Ouzels, Northern Wheatears, Meadow Pipits, and White Wagtails. A curiosity is Britain's only herd of free-range reindeer, descendants of animals introduced seventy-five years ago by an eccentric Swedish couple.

If possible—operating dates vary from year to year, and even in spring, the weather is an unpredictable factor—we will ride Scotland's only funicular railway to an elevation of some 3600 feet. The 1.5-mile trip takes about eight minutes, depositing us at the aptly named Ptarmigan Restaurant. Some of us may wish to enjoy the view from here; with special permits in hand, others can venture forth on an hour's walk on gravel paths across the alpine tundra, the summer home of Rock Ptarmigan, Snow Buntings, and Eurasian Dotterels.



European Badger © Andrew Whittaker

We'll spend our afternoon today at the Highland Folk Museum. The oldest open-air museum in the UK, founded nearly a century ago, these eighty acres are occupied by three dozen structures illustrating the rural life and folkways of the Highlands from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Some of the buildings are original structures, while others are painstakingly accurate re-creations of historic houses, churches, schools, and workshops. Using original implements from the museum's significant collections, docents demonstrate several of the crafts and trades that were vital to rural Highland life in the period before about 1950.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness



Eurasian Oystercatchers are common breeders in fields. © Andrew Whittaker

June 3, Day 7: Findhorn Bay, Nairn, and Cawdor Castle. We'll plan today's excursion to the mudflats and saltmarshes of Findhorn Bay and Nairn to coincide with the high tide, when rising waters push birds close to shore to feed or roost. We can hope to see Common Mergansers, Common Ringed

Plovers, or Eurasian Oystercatchers, all of which can be found nesting in the vicinity. Lingering winterers may include scoters or Long-tailed Ducks, and at this season, there is always the possibility of an exciting vagrant.



Cawdor Castle © Andrew Whittaker

After birding these productive sites, we'll stop to tour lovely Cawdor Castle. Shakespeare tended to not let historical detail get in the way of a good story: the fact that the castle was built more than 300 years after Macbeth died has not kept the two from being inextricably linked in the popular imagination. Construction of Cawdor Castle was begun by the thanes of Cawdor in the late fourteenth century; many additions have been made over the centuries, but the consistent use of a uniform style gives Cawdor a strong sense of aesthetic unity. The severity of the exterior belies an intimate, welcoming interior ornamented by ancient furniture, fine paintings, and outstanding tapestries. The castle has all the essential ingredients—a drawbridge and portcullis, minstrel's gallery, old towers, hidden trapdoors, dungeons—and, of course, ghosts. Two are said to haunt Cawdor Castle: one a lady in a blue velvet dress, and the other John Campbell, the first Lord Cawdor.

Spirits aside, the gardens and woods of Cawdor are a good place to look for Mandarin Ducks, White-throated Dipper, or Common Treecreepers. The elegant sculptural feeder in the walled garden is usually busy with a fine array of tits and finches, at times even including the regionally scarce Hawfinch.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness



A male Mandarin Duck in his full glory © Andrew Whittaker

June 4, Day 8: Black Grouse on the lek, and the Findhorn Valley. We will break our rule of late departures this morning, leaving the hotel well before breakfast to watch the captivating antics of Black Grouse on their lek. The males' slightly ludicrous bubbling vocalizations and pompous strutting determine the (sometimes literal) pecking order; the dominant male will occupy the prime real estate on the lek, and he will copulate with most of the females drawn to the show.

We'll enjoy a full breakfast before setting out again mid-morning, this time bound for the crystal-clear rivers, moors, and oak forests of the Findhorn Valley. This spectacular glacial valley is home to many great birds, and we can hope to come across Eurasian Stonechats, Meadow Pipits, and many other exciting species. Local birders know this breathtaking landscape as "Raptor Valley," and the Findhorn is probably the best site on our entire itinerary to look for Golden and White-tailed Eagles—both are rare, but neither is impossible. With luck, we may find a mountain hare or a roaming herd of red deer.

After this morning's early start, we plan to have a bit more rest time than usual in the afternoon before we gather for another convivial evening meal together.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness

June 5, Day 9: Fort George and Loch Ness. This morning, we will return to the Moray Firth, this time concentrating on historic Fort George and the coastal trail, just across the water from Chanonry Point. Fort George was built after the battle of Culloden to permanently suppress the Jacobite ambitions of Scottish Highlanders. This marvel of eighteenth-century military engineering was never attacked, and the enormous fort has survived nearly unchanged since its completion almost three hundred years ago. Those with family history in the region will enjoy a visit to the Highlander Museum here, with excellent displays dedicated to the history of the British army in Scotland.

The jagged coast of the Fort George promontory is a rich feeding ground for a wide range of aquatic and littoral birds. Common Eider, Bar-tailed Godwits, Common Ringed Plovers, and sometimes impressive numbers of gulls and terns can all be found here.



The ruins of Urquhart Castle brood over Loch Ness © Andrew Whittaker

After lunch, we'll visit famous Urquhart Castle, a romantic ruin perched atop an irregular stony outcrop. The castle is surrounded on three sides by the even more famous Loch Ness. Access to the loch is difficult anywhere else, so the fine view from the stunning ruins makes the castle and its excellent modern visitor center a great attraction.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness

June 6, Day 10: Troup Head Nature Reserve. None of the destinations we will have visited so far is much more than an hour from our Inverness hotel. Today's excursion is different, but well worth the two-hour drive each way.

We'll drive this morning to the towering sandstone sea cliffs of Troup Head, jam-packed at this season with some 130,000 seabirds in full breeding mode. Often at close range, we can watch nesting Northern Fulmars, Common Murres, Razorbills, and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Even a few Atlantic Puffins nest on the grassy slopes above the cliffs. Numbering more than 2000 pairs, the noisy gannetry here is the only nesting colony on the Scottish mainland. We will also keep our eyes open for European Shags, Great Skuas, Rock Pipits, Yellowhammers, and Corn Buntings. Gray seals, dolphins, and maybe even a whale or the rare

basking shark are all possibilities. Participants in our previous Scotland tours have been of one accord in proclaiming this *the* Highlands highlight of the trip, and we think you will agree.

We may be able to eat lunch in nearby Pennan, the striking setting for one of the best Scottish films ever made, “Local Hero,” starring Burt Lancaster. Pennan is also a great birding spot, with Northern Fulmars breeding on ledges just above the village’s only parking lot; the House Martins here are among very few populations known to still use natural cliffs and crannies for their nests.

We will be back in Inverness by late afternoon, with time to begin packing or to soak in the delights of one last evening in the Highlands.

NIGHT: Kingsmills Hotel, Inverness

June 7, Day 11: Departure. After a final breakfast in our hotel, we will make the fifteen-minute transfer to the Inverness airport, where the tour ends.

TOUR SIZE: The tour will be limited to 10 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Rick Wright and John Poyner



Rick Wright is a widely published author and sought-after lecturer and field trip leader. A native of southeast Nebraska, Rick studied French, German, Philosophy, and Life Sciences at the University of Nebraska before making a detour to Harvard Law School. He took the Ph.D. in Germanic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University in 1990, then spent a dozen years as an academic, holding successive appointments as Assistant Professor of German at the University of Illinois, Reader in Art and Archaeology at Princeton University, and Associate Professor of Medieval Studies at Fordham University. Rick’s numerous scholarly publications include two books on the Latin animal literature of the later Middle Ages. Among his recent books are second editions of the *ABA Field Guide to Birds of New Jersey* and of the *ABA Field Guide to Birds of Arizona*. His *Peterson Reference Guide to American Sparrows* is a standard work on that family. He is also the co-author with Sanford Sorkin of *Watching Birds in Montclair* and *Watching Birds in the New Jersey Meadowlands*. Rick lives in northern New Jersey with his wife, Alison Beringer, and their jet-black lab, Quetzal.



Scotland resident **John Poyner** has been a professional wildlife tour guide and freelance ornithologist for the past 20 years. After 12 years guiding tours throughout Scotland and abroad for two of Scotland’s leading wildlife holiday companies, and simultaneously conducting ornithological survey work, John launched his own company, Highland Nature, in 2012. He also serves as a wildlife expert and guide for the Birdwatching and Wildlife Club (BWWC) and for the Grant Arms Hotel in Granttown-on-Spey.

John holds a Bachelor of Science (honors) degree in environmental science and ecology. He has extensive experience in upland windfarm surveys, working in Scottish mountains in the winter months and in the summer breeding season.

John moved to Scotland in the early 1990s, where he volunteered for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds at Loch Garten and Insh Marshes. He then spent a season building trails in the Cairngorms Mountains before becoming assistant warden at RSPB's Loch of Strathbeg Reserve, where he spent the next two years. John has also worked as a seasonal countryside ranger for Aberdeenshire Council. Later, he spent time teaching in the Czech Republic before returning to the Highlands to become a full-time guide.

John is a competent and experienced ornithologist and a keen overall naturalist. An active birder for over 35 years, he administers the local Bird News Facebook page and the Highland Bird Forum, which he set up in 2006. John is based in Nethybridge, at the heart of the spectacular Cairngorms National Park, where he resides with his wife, Lucka, and sons, Mattias and Jakub.

TOUR COSTS & PAYMENT INFORMATION:

TOUR FEE: : The fee for the tour is **\$10,520** per person in double occupancy from Inverness. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 to breakfast on Day11, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Inverness and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

SINGLE SUPPLEMENT: The single supplement for this tour is **\$2,590**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: You may register for this tour through the VENT [website](#) or by calling our office (512-328-5221). The initial deposit for this tour is **\$1,000** per person. A second deposit of **\$3,000** is due 210 days prior to departure (October 30). We accept MasterCard and Visa for both deposits. If you choose not to register online, you may pay your deposit by credit card, check, money order, or bank transfer. If not paying online, or by card, your tour space will be held for 10 days pending receipt of your deposit..

PAYMENTS: All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information).

These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (December 29) prior to the tour departure date.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: Tour prices are based on the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If rates change drastically, it may be necessary to impose a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges have been passed on to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

FUEL SURCHARGES: Our prices are based on fuel prices at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TIPPING: An important part of the value of a VENT tour is knowing that tips for local service providers at our destinations—restaurant staff, hotel staff, drivers, local guides, and various other support staff—are included in your tour fee. If you would like to offer any of your local guides an additional tip, \$5 to \$10 a day is a common amount.

Tips for your VENT tour leader(s) are **not** included, but it is customary to tip one or both if you feel that you have received exceptional service. To assist in your planning, we recommend tipping your VENT tour leader(s) \$15 to \$20 per day, or the equivalent of approximately 2–4% of the tour fee.

If you plan to give tips by cash, they should be given directly to your tour leader at the end of the tour and **not** sent to the VENT office. Some of our tour leaders use mobile payment applications such as Venmo, PayPal, and Wise. If you would like to use this method, please ask your tour leaders directly whether they can accept tips through such an application.

We emphasize that tipping is optional and that these amounts are only recommendations. The amount you decide to tip is based entirely on your experience and at your discretion.

CANCELLATION & REFUNDS

CANCELLATION BY PARTICIPANT: Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 210 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months from the date of participant tour cancellation, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 209 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

<u>If participant cancels:</u>	<u>Participant's refund will be:</u>
210 days or more before departure date	Your deposit(s) minus \$500*
209 to 151 days before departure date	No refund of the deposits, but any payments on the balance will be refunded
150 days or less before departure date	No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months from the date of participant tour cancellation, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

CANCELLATION BY VENT: If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant;

provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A “**Force Majeure**” event means any act beyond VENT’s control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE/PROTECTION REQUIREMENT: This tour visits remote locations where immediate access to primary medical care may not be available. **For this reason, travel insurance/travel protection which covers you for emergency evacuation is required for participation on this tour.** This coverage is included in the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** program. Alternatively, comparable service can be obtained through **Medjet** and its **MedjetAssist** plan. If you choose not to purchase insurance/travel protection through Ripcord or Medjet, you are required to obtain it through another provider. Please read the remainder of this section for additional information.

SUGGESTED OPTIONS: To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with **Redpoint Travel Protection** as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend its comprehensive **Ripcord** plan, which includes a medical evacuation benefit. With this in mind, it is important to note that medical evacuation is not offered by Redpoint as a stand-alone policy or benefit. For travelers not interested in comprehensive travel insurance, VENT recommends **Medjet** and its **MedjetAssist®** plan. Medjet is not an insurance company, and Medjet Assist is not an insurance product; rather, Medjet is a membership-based air-medical transport company specializing in moving hospitalized travelers from an admitting hospital to a medical facility of choice. Medjet does not provide medical evacuation service from the point of injury or illness; yet, the MedjetAssist plan offers robust enough travel protection to satisfy the medical evacuation insurance requirement in place for many VENT tours.

About Redpoint Travel’s Ripcord Plan

Ripcord is a completely integrated travel insurance program with single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims. Critical benefits include comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, medical evacuation from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice; medical expense coverage, death of pet, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as evacuation coverage in case of a natural

disaster or political or security reasons, waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.*

For a price quote or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: [Ripcord Travel Insurance](#); or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help > Preparation and Insurance > Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 15 days of making your first trip payment. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, second deposit, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 15 days, and insure all non-refundable trip costs in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

Redpoint considers COVID-19 illness as any other seasonal respiratory illness. Providing only a positive Covid-19 test result will likely not be considered a covered event per the terms and conditions of the company's policy. Redpoint maintains a [Coronavirus FAQ page](#) on its website that addresses questions and concerns travelers may have regarding COVID-19 and Redpoint's policy. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of relevant topics.

About Medjet’s MedjetAssist Plan

MedjetAssist is a membership program that functions like AAA for motorists. The company’s primary service is air medical transport. Critical benefits of MedjetAssist include a staff on call and ready to provide assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; all-expenses-paid air medical transport in the United States and internationally to medical facility of choice, regardless of medical necessity; repatriation of remains; and no exclusions for pre-existing conditions.

For travelers under 75, MedjetAssist may be purchased as Short-Term Memberships of 8, 15, 21, and 30 days, or Regular Annual Memberships from 1 to 5 years. For travelers 75–84, Medjet offers a Diamond Membership that is the same program but with a few additional conditions.

For a price quote or to purchase MedjetAssist, please visit: [Medjet.com/VentBird](https://www.medjet.com/VentBird) or call 1-800-527-7478. Pricing is based on type and term of membership.

GETTING THERE & REQUIRED TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

AIR TRAVEL: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: \$50 domestic; \$75 international.* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be held responsible for any air ticket penalties.

*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler's consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

BAGGAGE: Please limit baggage to one piece of luggage and one carry-on. The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your pre-departure materials and/or airline to find out specific weight restrictions.

As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, toiletries, medications, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security, we recommend that you check the website of the [Transportation Security Administration \(TSA\)](#) for information pertaining to permissible carry-on items.

WHAT TO BRING

CLIMATE & CLOTHING: Spring in the Scottish Highlands is notoriously variable, but the scenery is fine whatever the weather. Be prepared for everything from cool temperatures in the 40s and 50s, with clouds, rain, snow flurries, and wind, to dry, beautifully sunny weather with temperatures rising to the high 60s and 70s.

Accordingly, you should pack warm, light clothing that you can put on and shed in layers to accommodate any combination of temperature, wind, and precipitation. We anticipate no truly cold weather at this season, but Gore-Tex, fleece, long underwear, and windproof and waterproof outerwear are still a good idea. Gloves and a warm hat will also help make any chilly mornings and evenings more comfortable. There is an opportunity in the Cairngorms to ride the funicular (if it is in operation) to a higher elevation in search of the Eurasian Dotterel and Rock Ptarmigan; no matter what the weather in the valleys, you will want to be warmly clad for that walk. We do not anticipate any long or muddy hikes, but you should wear sturdy walking shoes or boots in the field on most days; you will be more comfortable in the evenings if you also have a lighter pair of shoes to change into. Dress is casual throughout.

EQUIPMENT: Having the right equipment makes the travel experience more enjoyable. Below is a list of items that will ensure you are well-prepared:

Bring your favorite pair of standard-sized 7x42, 8x32, or 8x42 binoculars. Even the best mini-binoculars gather noticeably less light and have a noticeably narrower field of view than full-sized binoculars, and you will meet with greater difficulty locating the bird and less pleasure in watching it once found. The tour leaders will have spotting scopes available for group use, but you are welcome to bring your own; having your own scope can greatly increase your enjoyment of waterfowl, shorebirds, and displaying grouse. Always pack your optics, a change of clothing, medications, and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag.

You should also have with you:

- a good hat and high-SPF sunscreen
- lip balm
- polarized sunglasses with good UV protection
- a small umbrella
- hand sanitizer
- a refillable water bottle
- an alarm clock
- a small flashlight or headlamp
- extra batteries and memory cards for your camera
- spare glasses or contact lenses
- paper tissues
- toiletries

DESTINATION INFORMATION & LOCAL CONDITIONS

CONDITIONS: This is a relatively leisurely tour, with plenty of time on most days for a rest or some exploration on your own. A typical day begins with breakfast starting at 7:00. We usually leave the hotel at 9:00, driving to the day's localities for birding and sightseeing. Our simple lunch is scheduled for around 1:00 pm; we will be eating in modest cafes, sometimes at museums or historic sites, and as the fickle Scottish weather allows, we may be able to schedule a picnic of local specialties at one site or another.

We aim to return to the hotel between 4:30 and 5:00 in the afternoon, leaving a little time to relax and to review the day's checklist before dinner at about 6:30.

Our itinerary does include one later evening, when we visit a well-constructed, enclosed and heated blind set up at the edge of a feeding area for European badgers and other nocturnal mammals. Because daylight lasts so long at our latitude, we may arrive at the blind as late as 9:00 pm, returning to the hotel after 11:00. To make up for the late night, we plan a somewhat later start the next morning.

We have also planned one early morning outing, leaving the hotel before 6:00 am to observe Black Grouse on a nearby lek. We will follow this exciting experience with a full breakfast and a little time off before taking to the field again at mid-day.

Our excursions take us to a variety of sites and habitats, where we may walk up to a mile at a time. Most of the trails we walk are wide and level, posing very little challenge. To reach the spectacular seabird cliffs at Troup Head, we walk about half a mile each way on a narrow track with mounds of dirt and tussocks of grass. In the Cairngorms, if the funicular is running, we can walk a gravel path across the mountaintop moor in search of Dotterels, Snow Buntings, and other specialties; it is also possible to stay lower on the slope, at a café with good views of the mountain and many of its birds.

The most challenging walking will be at some of the cultural sites we visit. The tour of the interior of Cawdor Castle begins with a short steep staircase and ends with a longer, steeper spiral staircase. The gardens and woods there offer easier, ornithologically more interesting strolls, and it is always possible to sit in the peace of the flower garden and watch the usually busy feeders. Fort George is a massive installation, but

our route through the structure is entirely on pavement. The ruins of Urquhart Castle are about a third of a mile below the visitor center on the shores of Loch Ness; the return walk, on a wide, paved path, is steadily uphill. It is also possible to admire the view from comfortable seating on the visitor center terrace.

We assure you that you will never be expected to do anything exceeding your physical capacity, and that there are gentler alternatives to many of our more strenuous activities.

CURRENCY & SPENDING: The legal currency of Scotland is the pound sterling (GBP), easily obtained at ATMs in Scotland; pounds can also be ordered from your bank at home. US dollars are not accepted, but credit cards can be used almost anywhere. For up-to-date exchange rates, visit xe.com.

Note that many public restrooms in Scotland require payment for access. It is a good idea to hoard coins, especially 50-pence coins, in anticipation.



220 volts. The standard outlet in Scotland accepts only three-pin square plugs, and you should bring at least one Type G plug adapter with you from home. Most modern appliances can be run on either 110 or 220 volts, but if you are unable to confirm that for your devices, you will need a step-down transformer in addition to the plug adapter.

INTERNET ACCESS: Complimentary WI-FI is available in the hotel. In addition, most stores, cafes, and other public places have WI-FI service of variable quality.

LANGUAGE: English is spoken throughout (but you may have fun trying to decipher some of the local dialects and hear Gaelic being spoken at times).

TIME: Scotland is 5 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time, 8 hours ahead of Pacific Daylight Time.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Dry cleaning and laundry service are offered to guests but it is always a good idea to pack whatever clothing you need to get you through the tour without the inconvenience of having things laundered.

TRANSPORTATION: Transportation will be in a comfortable 22-seater coach with a professional driver. The distances we travel each day range from less than 50 to (once) nearly 200 miles; the scenery makes the longer drives more than bearable. We'll carry a supply of snacks for along the way.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH: VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

COVID-19: We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying “Up to Date” with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance for avoiding COVID-19.

SUN EXPOSURE: The sun’s ultraviolet rays are dangerous under prolonged exposure (sometimes only a matter of minutes), even in winter and early spring. Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. A severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

BITING INSECTS: Biting insects are usually not much of a problem at this time of year, but there may be some midges, gnats, or the odd mosquito, especially if the spring has been damp. It is always a good idea to bring a supply of roll-on insect repellent or, if you are especially attractive to bugs, a head net and light gloves.

INSECT REPELLENTS: There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- **DEET:** (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations including sprays, lotions, time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.
- **Picaridin:** A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.
- **Herbal insect repellents:** Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

Insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- **Permanone® (Permethrin):** is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for pre-treatment of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so it is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment must be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.

- **Insect Shield® apparel:** Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you>

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta Georgia. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line at 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636), or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING & TRIP PREPARATION

A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend www.amazon.com which has a wide selection; www.buteobooks.com and www.nhbs.com which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and www.abebooks.com for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

FIELD GUIDES:

Svensson, L., K. Mullarney, and D. Zetterstrom. 2023. *Birds of Europe*. Third edition. Princeton: Princeton UP. **Indispensable** for birding anywhere in Europe; in Great Britain, this book goes under the title *Collins Bird Guide* (Collins, 2023).

Films

Forsyth, B. "Local Hero." 1983.

History, Literature, and Culture

Lister-Kaye, J. *Song of the Rolling Earth*. London: Abacus, 2004.

Magnusson, M. *Scotland: The Story of a Nation*. London: HarperCollins, 2001.

Shepherd, N. *The Living Mountain: A Celebration of the Cairngorms Mountains of Scotland*. Canongate: Canons, repr. 2011.

Stevenson, R. L. *Kidnapped*. London: Sky Publishing, repr. 2016. Widely available for free on line.

Urquhart, T. *For the Beauty of the Earth: Birds, Opera, and Other Journeys*. Berkeley: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004.

CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY APPS & ONLINE RESOURCES:

eBird: Among the largest and most successful citizen science projects in existence, eBird is an essential tool in promoting bird study and conservation. Among a range of benefits, eBird allows users to keep a variety of lists in a single application. When taxonomic splits are incorporated, lists are automatically updated. Additionally, trip leaders can share daily lists, so one only need accept a shared list and it will upload to your files! **Highly recommended.**

MERLIN BIRD ID: Merlin is an app designed as a birding coach for beginning and intermediate bird watchers. Excellent for use in the field, Merlin asks the observer a series of questions regarding his or her bird sighting, including date and location, and color, size, and behavior of a bird. Merlin then processes the viewer's responses to present a shortlist of possible identifications, from which the user can choose the likely bird. Species profiles include a brief physical description, photographs, and sound samples. The Photo ID feature allows anyone with a camera to snap a photo and obtain a list of suggestions. Merlin's Sound ID feature allows identification of birds through audible recognition. To use Merlin, download the app, followed by the appropriate regional "pack."

TERMS, CONDITIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, "**VENT**") act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on August 14, 2025 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and

VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant's risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the "**Airline**") is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline's aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

View the complete [Terms and Conditions](#) on our website.

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