

Gotland – Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 6

Visby

Our hotel is situated just twenty minutes drive south of Visby's tiny airport. We'll settle in and start to explore Gotland's tranquil rural landscapes. We'll start right by the hotel which backs on to the island's western Baltic shore. The surrounding habitats are a beguiling mix of sand dunes, pine woods and marshy meadows, the latter where many ducks and waders breed. Still largely mown by hand these colourful meadows and dunes contain a rich flora and in early spring it will be the Pasque Flowers that draw our attention. For in Gotland these are not rare flowers, indeed they can be abundant with vast numbers waving their dark purple furry blooms above the tight turf characteristic of these coastal meadows. Near our hotel it will be the Small Pasque Flower, *Pulsatilla pratensis*, that provides the spectacle, but Gotland has no less than three species of these beautiful flowers.

The island's Viking heritage is never far out of sight and near our hotel is one of Gotland's finest examples of a Viking Stone Boat. We'll also encounter 'picture stones' though erosion has taken its toll on the pictures. We can see several that are still intact in Visby's excellent museum. Indeed we'll have a half day in this gorgeous little town. Visby's populace grew rich and powerful during a golden-age of trade that culminated in it becoming one of the Hanseatic League's main centres and indeed one of the great cities of Medieval Europe. Much of the town centre dates from this period, though you'd be hard-pressed to guess its age, so well-maintained are all the buildings.

Day 2

Kräklingo & Ardre Meadows

In the central part of the island (the farthest point on the island from the sea is about twenty miles!) are some wonderful old meadows and forest which we'll spend a day exploring. Delicate *Corydalis pumila* and altogether stockier *Corydalis solida* carpet the open woodland floor. We'll find stands of Yellow Wood Anemones along with abundant white Wood Anemones. In grassier areas are some of the island's botanical hotspots which at this season host abundant Cowslips, the Snowdrop Windflower, and Gotland's rarest pasque flower. The gotlandica subspecies of *Pulsatilla vulgaris* is an impressive form of this more widespread species, the larger flowers emerging before the leaves, and this subspecies is found nowhere else in the world. Nearby we'll find yet more evidence of the past as we visit not just one Viking Stone Boat, but a whole flotilla of them, constructed from many large stones and laid out in an open pine woodland.

Day 3

Kallgatburg & Gothemhammar

Today we'll cross limestone pavement decked out in a brilliant display of Early Purple Orchids, Hepatica and Cowslips. The limestone suddenly dips into a most rare habitat - the calcareous mires of Kallgatburg. Damp carex meadows are interspersed with stunted pines and yews giving a very northern feel to one of Gotland's premier natural sites. Later many rare orchids flower here but now it will be the turn of another of Gotland's pasque flowers, the gorgeous blue-violet Eastern Pasque Flower *Pulsatilla patens*. This species has much more open anemone-like blooms than the others and makes for a most arresting sight.

We'll visit Gothemhammar on the east shore of the island. Here the coastal pine woods are home to abundant Early Purple Orchids and the many shades of lovely Hepatica. Amidst marshy birch woods we'll seek the delicate Coralroot Orchid. Nearby forests harbour pretty *Corydalis intermedia* and the very rare Spitzel's Orchid.

Day 4

The Hoburgen

Today we'll visit the southern tip of the island. We'll pass Muskmyr where Marsh Harriers quarter the reedbeds and Hobbies will be hawking dragonflies. The marshy ground surrounding the wetland hosts plenty of the lovely little Birds-eye Primrose. Gotland is littered with fabulous picnic spots whether they be amongst pasque flower-filled meadows or by Viking Picture Stones and today's is no exception - some seats surround a two-tonne slab of rock next to Vamlingbo's three windmills! Later we'll explore headlands where Barnacle Geese nest in numbers alongside Ruff and Avocet and fields that are home to Barred Warblers and Red-backed Shrikes. The Hoburgen is a high bank of land that rises above the Baltic at the far southwestern tip of Gotland. It is a great spot for migrant birds and also hosts some fine flowers such as the uncommon *Corydalis nobilis*, each pale yellow flower centred with purple brown. More spectacular though are the large shining blooms of Yellow Pheasant's-eye.

Day 5

Stora Karlsö

Stora Karlsö's fabulous seabird colonies lie just half an hour's ferry journey from Klintehamn. As we swing into the sheltered harbour the sea is alive with whirring wings as Guillemots and Razorbills zoom hither and thither seemingly only partly in control of their trajectories. Small groups of Velvet Scoters, the males with garish orange bills, swim past as we dock. Elegant swallow-tailed Arctic Terns nest on the shingle bank by a café where we can get a cuppa before taking a walk into the island's juniper-dotted interior. The limestone cliffs are covered in breeding auks. There are some ten thousand pairs of Guillemots and two thousand pairs of Razorbills, the latter looking immaculate in their striking black and white attire.

There are quite wonderful photographic opportunities here. The air is filled with the raucous cries of auks, gulls and terns and thousands of birds are coming and going all the time - it feels like total mayhem - and thanks to two wonderfully positioned viewpoints one can experience this just metres from the nearest breeding pairs. We'll walk round the island enjoying the abundant Pasque Flowers as well as a quite magnificent display of Elder-flowered Orchids, these occurring in both the bright red form and the butter-yellow form.

Day 7
Fårö

Hundreds of sea stacks eroded by Baltic waves stand proud from reef limestone on Fårö's northern shore. Separated from Gotland by the mile wide Fårösund, Fårö's sandy soil contains no calcite and so has a flora more akin to northern Sweden. Amidst lichens and reindeer moss we'll find the first blooms of the delightful Twinflower. The furry deep purple flowers of the gorgeous pasque flower *Pulsatilla pratensis* adorn the old fields typical of Faro's landscapes. Clarion calls echo across the mires as Common Cranes descend to fens and lakes that here host Caspian Terns, Slavonian Grebes and Little Gulls. Immense White-tailed Eagles soar over the lakes looking for substantial fish to provide a decent meal. A walk amongst grassy meadows surrounded by hazelnut orchards offers us the chance of seeing Nutcracker and male Common Rosefinches in their resplendent red plumage.

Day 8
Return to UK

After breakfast we'll make the twenty minute journey to Visby's airport and start our journey back to the UK.

If you would like to ask about any aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.