

## Gotland

### Wildlife at Leisure

#### A Greentours Itinerary

##### Days 1 & 2

##### Liste Meadows and Visby

Our hotel lies just one hour southeast of Visby's tiny airport. We'll settle in during the evening and the next day will start to explore Gotland's tranquil rural landscapes. Meadows overlook a marshy Baltic shore where many ducks and waders breed. Still largely mown by hand these colourful meadows contain Red German Catchfly, lovely blue Spiked Speedwell and abundant Crested Cow-wheat, while rare Large Blues fly with Black-veined Whites and Mazarine Blues. Gotland is famous for its orchids and we'll soon encounter marsh orchids which as a group are tremendously diverse here. Early Marsh Orchid will be flowering with two close relatives, the bright *Dactylorhiza pulchella* and the white *Dactylorhiza ochroleuca*. Another, the newly discovered (in Gotland) *Dactylorhiza longifolia*, flowers in coastal valleys and inland amidst marshy birch woods is the delicate Coralroot Orchid. Pine forests harbour pretty One-flowered Wintergreen and rare Spitzel's Orchid.

The island's Viking heritage is never far out of sight and near our hotel is one of Gotland's finest examples of Viking Stone Boats. Indeed in open pine woodland we'll see a little flotilla of them made from a series of large stones. 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 3

##### Kallgatburg and Hejnum Hällars

Limestone pavement decked out in a brilliant display of Bloody Cranesbill, Kidney Vetch and Solomon's Seal is a haven for a variety of butterflies. Marbled, Glanville and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries are all common though the most obvious butterfly is the beautiful Apollo. 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 Gotland's premier orchid site. The beautiful Lady's Slipper will be holding its marvellous blooms up in tremendous stands - the best with fifty or more flowers - a fabulous sight. Pearl-bordered Fritillaries and abundant Black-veined Whites pose upon Fragrant Orchids and a wonderful array of

Marsh and Spotted Orchids that includes *Dactylorhizas curvifolia*, *cruenta*, *ochroleuca* and the rare *lapponica*. Both butterfly orchids, Birdsnest Orchid, Burnt-tip Orchid and Fly Orchid are numerous and Dark Red Helleborine and Marsh Helleborine will be in bud. The rest of the flora is extremely rich too. The yellow-green wands of German Asphodels carpet bogs where no less than five insectivorous species of plant live - amongst them *Drosera anglica*, Common Butterwort and the miniscule yellow-flowered *Utricularia minor*.

#### **Day 4**

##### **Southern Headlands**

Swathes of Military Orchids and Green-winged Orchids inhabit verges near Gotland's southern tip. A medley of hawkers, skimmers and damselflies inspect damp meadows bedecked with beautiful pinky-mauve Birdseye Primrose, Musk Orchid and marsh orchids whilst Marsh and Montagu's Harriers quarter reedbeds by Muskmyr's shore. Gotland is littered with fabulous picnic spots whether they are amongst orchid-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, Fly Orchids and Swallowtails.

#### **Day 5**

##### **Stora Karlsö**

Stora Karlsö's fabulous seabird colonies lie just half an hours 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.

#### **Day 6**

##### **Fårö**

Hundreds of sea stacks eroded by Baltic waves stand proud from reef limestone on Faro's northern shore. Separated from Gotland by the mile wide Fårö sund, Fårö's sandy soil contains no calcite and so has a flora more akin to northern Sweden.

Amidst lichens and reindeer moss we can find the tiny Lesser Twayblade, its diminutive flowers barely visible amongst the delightful Twinflower. Clarion calls echo across the mires as Common Cranes descend to marsh orchid filled 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 7**

### **The Western Woodlands**

Collared Flycatchers sing from oak boughs above a colourful patchwork of Dropwort, Field Cow-wheat and Common Columbine. Inside woodlands we'll encounter Goshawks, Common and Parrot Crossbills, the sibilant song of Wood Warblers and hopefully Black Woodpeckers. Geranium Argus butterflies are abundant and along one woodland ride we'll see Woodland Brown and the pretty little Northern Chequered Skipper. Red Helleborine may not yet be in flower but White and Sword-leaved certainly will, the latter in a carpet of wintergreens that include Nodding, Green-flowered and Round-leaved, all mixed together with Lily of the Valley and miniature May Lilies.

## **Day 8**

### **Return to the UK**

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