NEW Isle of Mull Cruise
NEW Somerset Levels with Mike Dilger
NEW Festival of Wildlife: Spitsbergen
Top Picks for 2019
China’s Mammals & Birds
Brazil’s Pantanal

Over 30 years of experience in natural history holidays
Isle of Mull Wildlife Cruise
with Nick Acheson

If a chance to see breeding puffins and seabird colonies, plus dolphins, minke whales and world-class sunsets appeals, all while circumnavigating one of the UK’s most beautiful islands, then this is probably the trip for you …

Isle of Mull Wildlife Cruise

There is a special light in Britain’s far north. But in midsummer, as daylight lingers late into the evening, divers call in the sea-lochs, bright-billed puffins fly low across the water and the sky fills with purples and reds of every hue, there is nowhere on earth more beautiful. Welcome to Scotland’s Western Isles.

The Isle of Mull is, arguably, the most scenic and wildlife-rich of the Hebridean islands, and has an impressive 480 kilometres of coastline. Lying to the west are the islands of Coll, Staffa and Lunga, and on this new six-night cruise we will aim to drop anchor on three or more of these Western Isles, going in search of their special flora and fauna. Our home for the duration of the holiday is the Seahorse II, an 82-foot-long vessel, ideal for exploring the small islands of the Western Hebrides, being small enough to anchor in remote spots! Harbour porpoise, common and bottlenose dolphins and minke whale are regularly seen in these waters, while orca, basking shark and Risso’s dolphin are possible too. Even sunfish have been known to drift this far north on the warm Gulf Stream.

After one night moored at Tobermory on Mull, we head for the low-lying island of Coll – the best place in the UK to see (and hear) corncrakes. Our skipper knows the island well, and we will drop anchor on the north-east side of Coll, from where we will go in search of the small population of breeding corncrakes as well as the island’s other special birdlife, machair habitat and flora.

We will also aim to spend a day on Lunga, largest of the Treshnish Isles, and a Site of Special Scientific Interest on account of its abundant plant life. As we approach the tiny island, we may find ourselves observed by seals, their heads popping out of the water like periscopes. After landing by means of a pontoon, we then make our way uphill over lush spongy grass, perhaps accompanied by the island’s distinctive morph of black rabbits. Lunga is a delightful place, and the chance to sit amongst thrift and other wildflowers, and observe, hear (and smell!) the dense seabird colonies of puffin, guillemot and razorbill, is not to be missed. The highlight of the day, for most, will be the chance to see the island’s incredibly confiding puffins (there are over 2,000 breeding pairs on the island) as they come and go around their nesting burrows.

Eagles and otters will be firmly on our agenda as we approach, and land on, the Isle of Mull. With a wingspan of over 2 metres, white-tailed eagles make for an impressive sight, and we’ll be hoping to watch one plunging down and snatching a fish from the sea. Golden eagles typically have a slightly shorter wingspan, and on Mull both species may be seen in the air in proximity to one another, making aerial comparisons possible. We will also walk along stretches of sea-loch, looking for signs of otters – Mull is one of the best places in the British Isles to see this delightful mustelid. June is a good time to see otters as they will be feeding their young and females are usually less wary of humans during this period, though sightings always require a degree of luck.

The Western Isles represent some of the UK’s most remote outposts, and a cruise – enjoying the natural history, scenery, marine life and some world-class sunsets – at this special time of year is a truly memorable experience!

Join popular Tour Leader Nick Acheson on our Isle of Mull Cruise in June 2019.

Isle of Mull Wildlife Cruise

Mon 24 - Sun 30 Jun 2019
Price £1,995 (cruise only)
2 single cabins at no extra cost
Leader Nick Acheson

Over 30 years of experience in natural history holidays
Welcome

We hope you enjoy our latest newsletter, which is packed with ideas to inspire your wildlife travels in 2019 and beyond.

Amongst our selection of new holidays for 2019 is a cruise to the islands of Mull, Lunga and Coll in search of eagles, otters and corncrakes, while TV Presenter Mike Dilger will be leading a new trip to the Somerset Levels. Elsewhere in Europe, we are offering a Photography Tour based in superb hides to Hungary’s steppe and forest in 2019, and a specially chartered cruise to Spitsbergen in 2020, led by a team of naturalists, photographers and expedition crew, timed to coincide with polar bears on the pack-ice.

For those after a bit of winter warmth, we have features on our birdwatching holidays to Colombia and Trinidad, whilst Brazil’s Pantanal offers a chance to see jaguars as well as a host of birdlife and other wildlife.

Finally, we’re delighted to welcome popular Tour Leader and naturalist Nick Acheson to our team and, in this issue, Nick shares some of his wildlife and travel secrets.

The Travelling Naturalist Team

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Our Holidays

For over 30 years our expert naturalists have led small group tours to some of the world’s most spectacular wildlife and birdwatching destinations. Our programme features over 100 nature holidays, and includes a range of bird, mammal and cetacean watching tours, as well as dedicated butterfly, dragonfly and wildflower holidays.

Cover image: golden snub-nosed monkeys (see pages 14-15 for details about our tour to Sichuan)
In spring, the Levels are alive with birdsong, as up to a dozen different species of warbler compete for airtime with our resident species. And while cuckoos call, hobbies can be seen chasing dragonflies along the numerous rhynes (ditches) that criss-cross a landscape graced with bitterns, marsh harriers and otters. The Levels doesn’t take a break in winter either as Britain’s largest starling murmuration takes centre stage, which in turn attracts hungry peregrines and sparrowhawks. It’s also easy to forget that the Levels at this time is also a wildfowl and wader wonderland.

I’m really excited by my new and exciting relationship with the Travelling Naturalist, as we offer clients the opportunity to join me in catching up with the diverse wildlife close to both my home and my heart. And, I promise the only thing you’ll catch from me is an infectious enthusiasm for all things wild!

Mike Dilger will be leading our new Somerset Levels holidays in 2019.

To break the ice in wildlife lectures, I frequently open with the phrase ‘Those of you unfamiliar with me should be ashamed of yourselves!’ I’m joking, of course, but in my capacity as the wild man of BBC1’s The One Show, who is paid to pontificate on everything from bumblebees to basking sharks, I’d like to think I’ve become a common fixture of early evening nature viewing over the last decade.

However, I should also point out that my love of wildlife pre-dates my appearances on television by over 30 years, as I’ve been an obsessive naturalist since childhood. After graduating with degrees in both Botany and Ecology, my first career entailed working as a Field Biologist in the forests of Ecuador, Vietnam, Tanzania and Peru. During close to five years spent immersed in these biologically diverse countries, I not only accumulated a huge bird list, but also managed to contract an impressive array of bizarre tropical diseases – leading to one of my nicknames as ‘Britain’s most diseased man’!

Returning to the UK, I was able to reacquaint myself with my first passion – British wildlife – and made the sideways move from a job in conservation to one making wildlife documentaries. Since 2011, I’ve been living with my family close to Chew Valley Lake in the West Country, which is within striking distance of both the City of Bristol (Britain’s green Hollywood) and the Somerset Levels. When not filming, writing about wildlife or giving talks, I’m out with my binoculars taking in the wildlife on my doorstep and beyond.

The wildlife on the Somerset Levels, in my biased opinion, is now world class. Thanks to ambitious re-wilding projects, the vast reedbed and marshland complex which dominates the landscape has become an ideal location for a whole array of sought-after birds and wildlife spectacles. What you see on the Levels will depend on the time of year, but locations such as RSPB’s Ham Wall and Natural England’s Avalon Marshes are capable of delivering wonderful sightings all year round. Labelled the ‘heron capital of Britain,’ the Levels is the only location to have recently hosted breeding little bittern, night heron and great white egret, in addition to being the headquarters of the Great Crane Project.

Mike Dilger, the self-confessed ‘wild man’ of BBC1’s The One Show, waxes lyrical about the birding delights of the Somerset Levels.
France – The Dordogne

Birds, Butterflies & Wildflowers

David Simpson leads our holidays to the Dordogne and in this article he describes the natural history and culinary highlights of a trip to this beautiful region.

For the naturalist, the Dordogne region in southwest France offers an exciting array of habitats. Indeed, I believe that the area is blessed with a ‘slice of the best’ of each of the surrounding departments! To put it into context for the British reader, the Dordogne is a real mosaic of landscapes with something of the Weald, Provence, the Welsh Marches, and a touch of Wiltshire thrown in for good measure!

Atlantic, Continental and Mediterranean climates all influence the Dordogne, resulting in a fascinating mix of flora and fauna. Species with very different habitat requirements can be found in relatively close proximity, such as Dartford warbler, martagon lily, black-winged kite, woodcock orchid, black woodpecker, hoopoe, heath lobelia, Cleopatra and violet dropwing. These are all spread amongst a beautiful verdant hilly landscape with mixed farming, in some areas more rolling and open, in others more mountain-like. The varied geology – mainly limestone and sands, but including igneous and metamorphic rocks – adds to this diversity, especially for the plant life. A long history of human settlement, farming and land management dating back to prehistoric times has increased this diversity still further.

Having lived in the Dordogne for nearly 20 years, I have gradually got to know the best places to see wildlife, thanks in part to friends and colleagues but also by searching for myself. I’ve guided in the region for nearly 20 years and our Travelling Naturalist holidays have been running successfully for almost ten. Currently we have three holidays in the programme. In March we have a winter birds tour on which we search for wallcreeper, Alpine accentor and eagle owl along with commoner bird species; and in sunny weather we may find butterflies such as large tortoiseshell. In May there is a spring wildlife tour with a profusion of orchids such as fly and lizard, as well as a mass of other spring flowers. Birds include early summer visitors such as hoopoe and Bonelli’s warbler, while varied fritillary and blue butterflies add to the mix.

We get up close to the river and black kites with a boat trip at Bergerac, and discover prehistoric paintings with a cave excursion. Finally, our June tour focuses on summer birds such as red-backed shrike, golden oriole and honey buzzard, plus a profusion of butterflies, dragonflies and wildflowers as midsummer approaches. In May and June 2019, we are fortunate to have the services of local botanist Corine Oosterlee on our tours.

All our Dordogne holidays include insights into the area’s history, culture and landscape. There is so much rich cultural heritage here, dating back millennia, that this becomes an essential and fascinating part of any walk in the Dordogne. Equally essential is sampling and enjoying the fabulous local cuisine and local food products. As such, we have planned a variety of restaurant meals and, when weather allows, picnic lunches.
David is leading the following holidays to the Dordogne in 2019:

### The Dordogne in Early Spring
- **Fri 1 - Tue 5 Mar 2019**
- **Price**: £1,195
- **Single supp**: £180
- **Group size**: 7
- **Leader**: David Simpson

### Spring Birds, Orchids & Prehistory in Wild Dordogne
- **Sat 11 - Sat 18 May 2019**
- **Price**: £1,745
- **Single supp**: £300
- **Group size**: 7
- **Leaders**: David Simpson & Corine Oosterlee

### Birds, Butterflies & Wildflowers of the Dordogne
- **Sat 15 - Sat 22 Jun 2019**
- **Price**: £1,695
- **Single supp**: £290
- **Group size**: 7
- **Leaders**: David Simpson & Corine Oosterlee
Four Seasons in Eastern Poland

Tour leader Andrzej Petryna reflects on eastern Poland’s unique natural history, which offers exciting bird, mammal and botanical discoveries all year around.

Even in modern Europe there is pristine, biodiverse wilderness, with a megafauna as thrilling as any on earth. It can be found, almost on our doorstep, in the enchanting country of Poland. The joy of Poland is that at every time of year its dramatic and diverse landscapes offer wildlife guaranteed to thrill the naturalist.

Spring
For birdwatching, spring in north-east Poland is unrivalled in Europe. Here are two extraordinary treasures: the Bialowieza Forest and Biebrza Marshes. Bialowieza, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is Europe’s largest ancient lowland forest. Until the recent split of Iberian green woodpecker, this towering forest could boast all ten European woodpeckers. Inconvenient splits aside, this remains remarkable. Also here are such gems as collared and red-breasted flycatchers, greenish warbler, pygmy and Tengmalm’s owls, spotted nutcracker and hazel grouse. In surrounding farmland and marsh, greater and lesser spotted eagles, corncrake, black stork, citrine wagtail and great snipe are often seen. Birds are far from the only attraction: there’s a good chance of meeting stately European bison and, with luck, even wolf or an elusive European lynx. The Biebrza Marshes – among Europe’s largest freshwater wetlands – are another wildlife paradise. Thousands of geese, swans, terns and waders gather in spring, though perhaps the most wanted bird here is the rare aquatic warbler. This is also a great time to see elk, beaver and otter, while the visiting botanist will be enthralled by the region’s lady’s slipper orchids.

Summer
For butterflies, summer is the season to visit Poland. Many of the best sites are in the south-east, from the chalk hills and steppes to the Pieniny and Tatra Mountains. Butterflies here are too diverse to list but include such sprites as violet copper, Ripart’s anomalous blue, short-tailed blue, Pallas’ and lesser marbled fritillaries and the glorious Apollo. Alongside butterflies there is a profusion of orchids, including short-spurred fragrant and heath spotted. But don’t just look down: scanning the high meadows you may spot Tatra chamois, Tatra marmot and brown bear.

 Autumn
In Autumn, south-east Poland is superb for migration. Flocks of buzzards and kestrels migrate through the Pieniny Mountains, accompanied by rarer eastern imperial and lesser spotted eagles. Higher up, Alpine accentor, water pipit and Peregrine may all be seen. The medieval fishponds here teem in autumn with red-crested pochard, ferruginous duck, red-necked and black-necked grebes, whiskered tern, bearded reedling and penduline tit.

Winter
A winter visit to eastern Poland is a must for the mammal watcher. In the Christmas card landscape of Bialowieza, European bison, wild boar and pine marten may all be seen, while deep snow makes it easy to track footprints of European lynx and wolf. In Biebrza, winter brings out otters and beavers, among great flocks of ducks and imposing white-tailed eagles. Nearby, the cellars of a 19th-century fortress are the hibernation site of no fewer than ten species of bat.

Whatever your interest in natural history, Poland’s great forests and marshes, traditional small farms and ancient wooden homesteads will delight. So much so that you’ll want to visit in spring, summer, autumn and winter to experience everything this wonderful country has to offer.
Andrzej is leading the following seasonal holidays to Poland in 2019:

**Primeval Forests & Marshes**
*Spring*
Mon 6 - Mon 13 May 2019
Price £1,595
Single supp £145
Group size 10

**Butterflies & Moths of Southern Poland**
*Summer*
Sun 14 - Mon 22 Jul 2019
Price £1,595
Single supp £160
Group size 10

**Birding in Krakow & the Carpathians**
*Autumn*
Sat 7 - Sat 14 Sep 2019
Price £1,475
Single supp £145
Group size 10

**Poland’s Winter Wildlife**
*Winter*
Thu 28 Feb - Wed 6 Mar 2019
Price £1,395
Single supp £125
Group size 10

01305 267994 | sales@thetravellingnaturalist.com | www.thetravellingnaturalist.com
Wildlife photographer Ashley Grove will be leading our Spring Photography of the Steppe & Forests holiday in May. In this article he describes a trip he made to the region this summer.

If you’re a keen amateur wildlife photographer, nothing beats the combination of comfortable, spacious hides in great locations, with expert local knowledge and photography tuition on tap. Our spring photography holiday to southern Hungary provides all these ingredients, and when I heard that I would be leading this popular tour in spring 2019, I headed straight for Hungary’s Great Plains region to research the trip.

Park ranger István Bartol provides the holiday’s expert local knowledge, and each hide visited on the tour is constructed and maintained by István. When I visited in July, having checked into my comfortable rural accommodation, I was whisked straight off to one of the infinity hides where many of the local passerines come to drink and bathe.

The next day started with a morning session in a tower hide overlooking a colony of red-footed falcons – one pair still had mature chicks to feed, as did a pair of kestrels – which made for some very entertaining photography. European roller and lesser grey shrike could also be photographed from here. It’s possible to shoot from three sides of the hide, making it suitable for two, or possibly three, people. The early starts each day are rewarded with an ample late breakfast and plenty of time from around midday to late afternoon to recharge your batteries – both the camera’s, and your own! The late afternoon/early evening session on my second day was spent with a local European bee-eater colony. These birds nest in holes in the ground, rather than in a bank. I timed sessions here so that the subjects would be backlit, producing some excellent images.

Other highlights included eye-to-eye photography of various species of herons, egrets, waders, ducks and even spoonbill, spotted crake and water rail from waterside hides; I also got good shots of whiskered tern, little bittern, marsh sandpiper and ferruginous duck from these hides.

Considering that my visit gave me just a quick taster of this area ‘out of season’, I am very excited to return in 2019, to see what it’s like at the ‘right time of year’!
Top Picks for 2019

With over 100 wildlife tours worldwide to choose from, our expert team has picked some of their favourites for 2019. To view our full selection, please visit the website.

Ghana
Quest for the Picathartes
Search for the white-necked picathartes and stay within walking distance of a nest! Other highlights include canopy walkway birding, and butterflies galore!

Wed 20 Feb - Sun 3 Mar 2019
Price £2,495
Group size 10
Leader Wilson ole Kasaine

Malaysia
Peninsular Birding
Explore a variety of habitats in Malaysia's premier birdwatching areas in search of all ten species of Malaysia's hornbills among a host of exciting birds.

Fri 1 - Sun 17 Mar 2019
Price £3,855
Group size 10
Leader Andrew Sebastian

Cyprus
Spring Birds & Flowers
A relaxing single-centre holiday focusing on watching the spring bird migration in full flow, plus resident birds, wildflowers, superb hospitality and cuisine.

Tue 19 - Tue 26 Mar 2019
Price £1,865
Group size 10
Leader Jane Stylianou

The British Isles
Lancashire Long Weekend in Spring
Enjoy thousands of waders and wildfowl in Morecambe Bay, bittern and bearded tit in Leighton Moss, and hen harrier and ring ouzel in the Forest of Bowland.

Fri 10 - Mon 13 May 2019
Price £745 (land only)
Single supp £185
Group size 8
Leader Ed Hutchings

Georgia
Georgia's Raptor Migration
This tour focuses on Batumi's spectacular raptor migration – it's possible to see thousands of raptors daily, including honey-buzzards, eagles and kites.

Sat 21 - Sat 28 Sep 2019
Price £2,295
Group size 10
Leader Aslan Bolkvadze

The Netherlands
Waders in Friesland
The northern coast of the Netherlands is one of the key European hotspots for seeing not only quality, but also a mind-blowing quantity of waders.

Sat 17 - Wed 21 Aug 2019
Price £995
Group size 7
Leader Martijn Bot

Finland
Brown Bear Explorer
An eight-day tour to watch and photograph brown bear, wolverine and wolf from purpose-built hides; special birds include Siberian jay and crested tit.

Sun 16 Jun, Sun 7 Jul & Sun 28 Jul 2019
Price £1,895
Group size 10
Leader Jani Määttä

India
Birds & Big Cats
Visit Corbett, Keoladeo and Ranthambore National Parks in search of tiger, leopard and superb birdlife, plus enjoy cultural highlights including the Taj Mahal.

Sat 9 - Sat 23 Nov 2019
Price £3,395
Group size 10
Leader Durgesh Singh

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Join our expert team of naturalists, photographers and expedition crew on our 2020 Festival of Wildlife to Spitsbergen. This specially chartered cruise has been timed to maximise our chances of seeing polar bears on the pack-ice, and in this article Wildlife Consultant Chris Smith describes the thrill of seeing his first polar bear.

Our ship slips quietly through the sea. We are heading north from Spitsbergen towards one of the smaller islands of the Svalbard Archipelago – the only land between our ship and the North Pole. It's midsummer in the High Arctic, and the sky is a washed-out blue, the colour of faded jeans. So far, I've seen puffins flying fast and low across the water; chunks of ice the size of a small house calve from glaciers; and blue whales – their breath visible as it condenses in near-freezing air, just 15 metres from our ship … but no polar bears. Not yet.

Slowly, the tiny island we're heading for begins to take shape, its two distant peaks looming ever larger until we pass right between them and drop anchor in a protected cove. All I can hear is the sound of breaking waves and bird calls ringing around the mountains. I head out on deck and see ivory gulls, one of the Arctic's most endangered species. The gulls' pure white adult plumage is perfectly adapted to blend in with snow and ice. Spitsbergen is one of the species' last strongholds, but much is still unknown about their full range.

We spot the distinctive blubbery outline of walruses on the shoreline and set off in Zodiacs to take a closer look. Approaching as quietly as possible, we are close enough to make out details on their bodies with the naked eye. Excited about our morning's Arctic wildlife viewing, we return to the ship. However, as soon as we step back onboard there is a message, the news we've all been waiting for, given on the ship's tannoy – 'Polar bear spotted onshore'!

We pull our warm clothes on again and climb back into the Zodiacs. There's an air of hushed excitement in the group as we approach the shore, quietly and carefully. Then I get my first glimpse – a large female. I've seen bears in the wild before but I'm struck by the size of this, my first polar bear, as she feeds on a walrus carcass. After eating her fill, she makes herself comfortable on the beach and lies down, surveying her surroundings.
Festival of Wildlife Team

Nick Acheson
Chris Breen
Mark Carwardine
Bret Charman
Nick Garbutt
Nick Joynes
China – Sichuan’s Sensational Mammals & Birds

China is home to some of Asia’s most desirable species. In October 2018, Barrie Cooper led our inaugural mammal and birdwatching holiday to Sichuan Province and in this article he describes the trip’s highlights.

Sichuan is a wonderful part of China. Its landscape comprises the Sichuan Basin and vast Tibetan Plateau, and its snow-capped, forest-clad mountains are an extension of the great Himalaya. This is scenery on a grand scale – towering snowy peaks shrouded in twisty snake-like mists, and big skies over high-altitude (over 3,500 metres) grasslands that stretch from one horizon to the other, with grazing yaks outnumbering sheep and cattle. I was delighted to lead our first trip to the region in October 2018 – not least because of the region’s delicious and world-famous food. However, it’s the province’s fantastic wildlife that makes Sichuan truly special for naturalists, and the reason for our visit.

Our Sichuan adventure began on the grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau. After driving through snow one morning we were rewarded with sightings of two red foxes on a nearby hillside. Then a snowy walk brought us to within a few hundred metres of a pair of Tibetan wolves close to a road. One wolf (pictured opposite) stopped and looked back at us, giving us excellent views, before it moved away onto the grasslands. The second wolf crossed the road to join its companion, and the two of them melted away into the distance. What a start to the day!

Elsewhere on the high grasslands we saw numerous larks, snowfinches and pikas. But it was a hunting saker falcon that got everyone excited as it flew close to our group. Upland buzzards, Himalayan vultures and red-billed choughs were also regular sights, while a hillside scan brought us our first view of Tibetan fox. We watched for some time as the fox made its way past herds of yak, and managed a total of nine Tibetan foxes on that day alone. We saw Pallas’ cat by torchlight, while from a viewpoint on the grassland by day we saw grazing Tibetan gazelles along with more Tibetan foxes, this time hunting pikas. A pair of lammergeier flying low and close overhead was also memorable.

Next it was time to explore Sichuan’s forested mountains, already spectacular in their autumn colours. A trio of glamorous pheasants awaited us: blue-eared, Lady Amherst’s and golden, as well as endemics including Sichuan tit, Sichuan leaf warbler and the very attractive crested tit-warbler. Black-necked crane, six species of redstarts and four accentors were also noteworthy.

In total we saw 35 mammal species … more, if you include unidentified bats! One of the highlights was a family group of golden snub-nosed monkeys feeding at the tops of fruiting trees in Labahe forest. We also had brief views of a lone male at Tangiahe, as well as a sighting of the very elusive Asiatic black bear. Other special mammals included Chinese goral, forest musk deer, both Tibetan and rhesus macaques, and the sought-after takin – a strange-looking animal with a face like a wildebeest and a golden coat. We saw several takins during the trip, and even had them wandering around the grounds near our hotel rooms. They proved very photogenic!

Overall, we had wonderful mammal and bird sightings, to a backdrop of some breathtaking scenery, and fortified each day with delicious food – the latter also a real highlight of the trip. I can thoroughly recommend this destination, both in terms of wildlife and gastronomy.
A stay at Trinidad’s world-famous Asa Wright Nature Centre offers both novice and experienced birdwatchers a mouthwatering taste of Neotropical birding. Tour Leader Terry Goble elaborates …

Trinidad is a true Neotropical birding paradise. With nearly 500 species (and one of the top ten countries in the world for bird species per square kilometre), this little island packs a punch well above its weight in avian terms. A key reason that it is so exciting for birders is its location – one of the Caribbean islands, but situated just 15 kilometres from the coast of Venezuela, Trinidad is a haven for both Caribbean and South American species. The birding at Asa Wright is relaxed and leisurely, yet it is not uncommon to see between 60 and 70 species in a single day at the Centre. During the early part of the year the weather is generally warm and sunny; however, at the Asa Wright Nature Centre the temperatures are kept in check by cool breezes blowing around the hills and this adds to the laid-back atmosphere. All in all, the island of Trinidad is perfect for those looking for a comfortable and peaceful experience of nature, with excellent opportunities to see a colourful assortment of birds.

The best place to enjoy and observe the island’s remarkable abundance of birds is the world-renowned Asa Wright Nature Centre, hidden away in the hills of Trinidad’s Northern Range. Here the birding is easy, just the way it should be on a Caribbean island! For a perfect day’s birdwatching, all you have to do is position yourself on the Centre’s famous verandah and watch the natural world literally fly by: Spend a couple of hours here, and you’ll be amazed at what you can see in such a short space of time. A mouthwatering variety is possible: blue-crowned motmots flittering in the trees; white-necked jacobins darting between the feeders; ornate hawk-eagles catching thermals high in the sky; woodcreepers sneaking along the branches; white-flanked antwrens rustling amongst the fallen leaves.

It would be easy to spend most of your waking hours settled (perhaps with a coffee or rum punch, depending on the time of day) on the verandah. However, with so much avian variety on offer, it is well worth the effort of spreading your proverbial wings and heading a little further afield, such as taking a boat excursion on the Caroni Swamp to view scarlet ibises flying to roost. The Asa Wright Nature Centre protects 2,000 acres of rainforest, and a leisurely stroll armed with your binoculars, along any of its extensive network of trails, should prove very rewarding. Amongst the possible highlights are: tufted coquettes humming around a flowering shrub; the distinctive call of the bearded bellbird from the tree-tops; a chance to watch the unique behaviour of golden-headed and white-bearded manakins; an evening excursion for nesting leatherback turtles; and a visit to the Centre’s resident colony of cave-dwelling oilbirds.
Easy Birding in Trinidad

Sun 7 - Mon 15 Apr 2019

Price £3,095

Single supp £395

Group size 12

Leader Terry Goble

Leatherback turtle

Purple honeycreeper

Tufted coquette

Caroni Swamp (main image)
Colombia offers the keen birder a thrilling experience. In this article Robin Smith, who will be co-leading our 2019 holiday, describes the highlights of our first tour to this endemic-rich country.

Colombia has made great political progress over the past decade and is currently enjoying a new period of stability and prosperity. On our inaugural Colombia tour, the aim was to explore the country’s finest birding sites at a considerate pace, while staying in the finest available lodges. In total 425 species were encountered, including 37 Colombian endemics and a plethora of range-restricted and rare species. Of special note were 47 species of hummingbird, nine species of antpitta and a host of colourful tanagers, toucans, woodpeckers, owls, raptors and many more avian gems besides.

A marshland site outside Bogota produced the first of the tour’s many endemic species – Bogota rail. Moving on to Colombia’s central Andean range (the Andes splits into three ranges within Colombia), highlights included a thrilling mixed-species flock, while a host of antpittas delighted with point blank views, and hummingbird and tanager feeders provided further avian treats. High altitude páramo habitat revealed the much-wanted hummingbird, buffy helmetcrest, as well as black-chested buzzard-eagle, while a slow descent through lush cloud forest produced crimson-mantled woodpecker and plushcap.

In Colombia’s western Andean range, feeding parties of endemic yellow-eared parrots proved memorable, as did lacrimose mountain-tanager and barred fruiteater. A private garden with fruit feeders attracted stunners such as crimson-backed tanager, Andean motmot and red-headed barbet, while time spent at an Andean cock-of-the-rock lek was another highlight of the region. On the Pacific slope of the same western Andean range, in habitat known as the Choco, birding proved sensational. Much sought-after species such as gold-ringed and black-and-gold tanagers, black solitaire and golden-headed quetzal were all seen well, and a new suite of hummingbirds included violet-tailed sylph and velvet-purple coronet. However, the star bird of the Choco came in the form of a rare cloud forest pygmy owl, seen at eye level from just a few metres away!

Having explored all three of Colombia’s Andean ranges, the group headed to Santa Marta – an isolated mountain range that holds a unique array of Colombian endemic birds. Exciting species came thick and fast – an early morning flyover of rare military macaws was a highlight of the foothills, while ‘Santa Marta endemics’ started to appear higher up in the form of Santa Marta brush-finch and Santa Marta antbird. The famous El Dorado lodge was the group’s base from which to explore this birding paradise, and the gardens provided many new species including endemic white-tailed starfrontlet. Thrilling new birds kept on coming, with treasures including the retiring Santa Marta antpitta, Santa Marta mountain-tanager and white-tipped quetzal. It had been a magical few days’ birding, with views of the Caribbean coast far below and shimmering snow-capped peaks high above. The final ‘new species’ for the tour, seen outside Bogota, was sword-billed hummingbird – a fittingly unique and special bird for what had been an equally unique and magical trip.

Of course, the tour checklist quickly reveals Colombia’s amazing avian diversity, but what it can’t convey is the group’s new appreciation for a country that is making great strides towards becoming one of the world’s top birding destinations. Indeed, this was a wonderful journey of discovery full of friendly faces, delicious food, superb coffee and, of course, unparalleled birding. Thankfully, Colombia’s doors are now wide open, and an untold number of wildlife treasures awaits any travelling naturalist visiting this incredible country.

Colombia’s Birding Highlights
Fri 22 Nov - Mon 7 Dec 2019
Price £4,725
Single supp £585
Group size 10
Leader Hernan Arias
Helen Bryon travelled to Brazil’s famous Pantanal earlier this year. In this article she describes the wealth of wildlife on display in this remarkable wetland.

 Barely 24 hours earlier I’d been driving up the M3, rushing to Heathrow for my flight to São Paulo and connection to Cuiabá. Now here I was in blazing sunshine, eye to eye with caiman lurking in the water hyacinths surrounding us … we were waiting for another glimpse of the agami heron perched silently in the shadows above us. Scarce-ly believing our luck, we waited with baited breath as it flew to a lower branch, and then came lower still. As it moved ever closer to us, our bins and lenses were trained upon it, all of us desperate to capture this sought-after bird in our frames. Lowering one leg into the water, and then the other, it stood motionless, ready to strike with lightning speed at unsuspecting prey. And all this after the most incredible views of an American pygmy kingfisher en route to our current position. Welcome to the Pantanal, I thought – catnip to naturalists. This is going to be good.

My earlier drive down the Transpantaneira had delivered the usual suspects: gloriously grotesque jabiru stork; stunning roseate spoonbill; maguari and wood storks; and dozens of southern crested caracara and snail kite. Ubiquitous cocoi heron stood, wings spread, basking in the tallest treetops, whilst sungrebe and jacana favoured the waterline below. Capybara nonchalantly munched their greens, wallowing like warthog, their wet fur glistening in the heat whilst marsh deer increased the mammal count. Everywhere we looked there were signs of life and yet this was the tail end of the dry season.

Flashes of colour came not only from the pink piuva trees punctuating the horizon like a riot of giant candy floss, but also from orange-backed troupial, vermilion flycatcher, squawking hyacinth macaw, campo flicker and glittering-throated emerald, not to mention the most glorious sunset. As the night-time cacophony lulled me to sleep, I dreamt of the animal that had brought me here in the first place – jaguar. Maybe tomorrow …

I needn’t have worried. After waking to the marvellous, prehistoric chorus of howler monkeys, we headed out on the water enjoying morning and afternoon boat safaris in search of the continent’s apex predator – a species that had been described to me as ‘leopards on steroids’. With jaguar sightings on the increase (we were fantastically fortunate and enjoyed an average of two to three sightings per outing!), researchers are rewriting everything we thought we knew, including their supposedly elusive habits. I am happy to report that ‘shy’ isn’t a word I’d use to describe jaguars, so get ready to fill those memory cards.

Whilst I will always be a big cat girl, it is the little things that have left a lasting impression: the screech of a pair of southern screamers; the unexpected beauty of a leaping sunbittern exposing its magnificent wing markings; fresh spearmint-green iguana against white-gold sand banks; the fluid athleticism of giant river otters; rounding a bend in the river to face a huddle of guira cuckoo sunning themselves in the morning light; and that sensational moment when the sun illuminates a toco toucan’s bill.

Ever heard of the expression ‘the gift that keeps on giving’? Well, the Pantanal kept on giving. Every day was better than the last and the memories are refusing to fade.
Don’t Just Take Our Word For It …

Please find below a few testimonials from clients about our tours. To read more client reviews of our holidays please visit our website.

Scotland – Splendours of Wester Ross
Jan Martin, Jul 2018

“Louise did a fantastic job. Her range and depth of knowledge is pretty remarkable. She had put together a terrific itinerary that picked out all the highlights of the area, and she did a brilliant job organising everything and looking after the group. Wildlife highlight: watching an otter swim across the bay in front of us!”

Our next 6-day Scotland – Splendours of Wester Ross holiday departs Monday 10 June 2019 and costs from £1,195 per person (land only).

The Netherlands – Waders in Friesland
Michael Kesseler, Aug 2018

“Excellent, tireless, personable and highly knowledgeable tour leader who could not have done more. Good accommodation and venue transits. Wildlife highlights: white-tailed eagles, and vast numbers of sea-line waders flocking.”

Our next 5-day The Netherlands – Waders in Friesland holiday departs Saturday 17 August 2019 and costs from £995 per person.

Costa Rica – Cloud Forests, Jungles & Volcanoes
Cliff Gilbert, Mar 2018

“Overall, I have to say this was one of the best overseas trips I have been on, and I’ve done a few with The Travelling Naturalist now. So, where next…?”

Our next 14-day Costa Rica – Cloud Forests, Jungles & Volcanoes holiday departs Saturday 16 February 2019 and costs from £4,195 per person.

To receive details of our new tours, offers, events and to read more client testimonials, visit our website (www.thetravellingnaturalist.com) and subscribe to our regular e-newsletters.
Meet the Wildlife Team

In this issue we put our questions to Wildlife Consultant and Tour Leader Nick Acheson.

A lifelong naturalist and conservationist, Nick lived for ten years in Bolivia, spent over three years in Asia and has worked with wildlife on every continent. A popular and experienced Tour Leader, we’re delighted that Nick has joined our expert team.

What’s the best piece of advice you give to your clients?
See before taking a photograph. Watch before ticking and tearing off to the next species. Realise the enormous privilege of travelling to wild places and seeing their wonderful inhabitants. Breathe.

What’s been your favourite wildlife discovery?
Many years ago I found signs of maned wolves in a remote area of Bolivia where they were not previously known. It took me months to persuade the park rangers, who were sceptical of the skills of a skinny Norfolk newbie, that the wolves were there. Finally, as the rains abated, they began to be seen, but by the rangers and not by me! The rangers took great delight in pointing this out. When I finally saw a wolf, I felt the wild grassland of the Brazilian shield had grudgingly accepted me.

What’s the hottest wildlife destination for 2019?
So many spring to mind. I think much of China and Indonesia are crying out to be explored by naturalists. And South America, though much loved and often visited, is not properly explored. Who’s up for giant armadillos and jaguarundis?

Which wildlife destination has most surprised you?
Ethiopia. We have a cultural memory of the awful images of famine from the 1980s and, whenever I go, friends assume I’m heading to a desert. It is the most dramatically beautiful country, of which its people are justly proud. The wildlife is unique, amazing and hugely varied. Sitting in the grass in the Simien Mountains with hundreds of geladas flowing round you, just feet away, is among the most remarkable things you will ever experience.

Which three items would you never travel without?
Ziploc bags: they keep anything and everything clean and dry in more or less any conditions, and clients are forever grateful if you produce one when needed.
A small fold-down umbrella: in most humid destinations a brolly is hugely more useful, and easier to carry and use, than a waterproof.
My phone: not because I want to contact anyone but because I switch off at night listening to Bach.

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Photographs courtesy of: Catherine Strong, Ashley Grove, Robin Smith, Bret Charman, Tang Jun, Chris Smith, Helen Bryon, Nick Gatbait & Lukasz Mazurek. Apologies for any omissions.

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