

# The Best of Sussex in Winter

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Meet at the hotel at 3pm. Nearby excursion for roosting harriers and swans.
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- Day 2 – 4** Pagham Harbour, Thorney Island, heathlands, woodlands and valleys
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- Day 5** Mid-afternoon departure
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### Departs

January/February

### Focus

Birds

### Grading

Grade A – easy day walks.

### Dates and Prices

Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code GBR155)



### Highlights:

- Enjoy myriad waders at Pagham Harbour
- Offshore reveal Slavonian Grebes & sea ducks
- Knot, Golden Plover, Spotted Redshank and Greenshank.
- Farmland birds include Grey Partridge & Corn Bunting
- Pre-roost gatherings of Hawfinch
- Birds-of-prey could include Hen Harrier
- Firecrest are abundant in this area
- Led by an expert Naturetrek naturalist



From the top: Firecrest, Hawfinch & Grey Partridge



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## Introduction

West Sussex is locally touted as the county's premier birdwatching destination with approximately 150 species of birds present. We will be based within the country's most recently designated national park – the South Downs National Park, and here we will search for the county's winter highlights that reside within the marshes, woodlands, heathlands and farmland.

On this 5-day break, we will take in the best of West Sussex, including visiting the extraordinary Pagham Harbour where we hope to see thousands of birds at either high or low tide. Dark-bellied Brent Geese also number in their thousands here, while also present are smaller numbers of Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit and Grey Plover. It isn't just the sheer number of waders which should be a highlight here, offshore is the annual wintering site for Slavonian Grebe; in some winters, Red-necked Grebe and Long-tailed Duck can also linger offshore.

As we head inland, large expanse of woodland has an extraordinary roost of Hawfinches, and we will be sure to position ourselves in good time to see these impressive finches gather at their pre-roost site. Marsh Tits, Treecreepers, Red Kites and Bramblings are usually present each winter, though the latter fluctuates in numbers year on year.

We will be visiting a couple of heathlands for Dartford Warbler. Woodlarks can be heard singing on mild winter mornings, and we may even be treated to a wintering Great Grey Shrike, though these have become increasingly rare in the county.

Lastly, we will venture up into the hills to search the well maintained farmlands. Excellent management here as ensured Grey Partridge, Skylark and Corn Bunting flourish, while Red Kites are very common, and there is the possibility of a wintering Hen Harrier or Short-eared Owl here too. The views of the Arun Valley from here are superb, and as we overlook Arundel Castle to the south, we perhaps could locate a herd of Bewick's Swans, or the resident Cattle Egrets!



Bewick's Swan

## Itinerary

*Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.*

### Day 1

Your Naturetrek leader will meet you at the hotel at 3pm. After our meet and greet, we will drive to a nearby site to wait for the hoped-for Marsh Harriers and Bewick's Swans that roost near to the historic town of Arundel. A Hen Harrier could even fly through to roost, and Woodcocks are strangely abundant in this area. In recent years, this has been an excellent site for roosting Cattle Egrets too. After dusk, we shall drive back to the hotel where dinner will be ready for us.

### Day 2

Depending on tide times, we will make an early start this morning to enjoy the many waders that gather at high tide in Pagham Harbour. The harbour lies south of Chichester and to the east of Selsey Bill, providing a sheltered location for thousands of waders. We may witness spectacular flocks of Knot, Dunlin, Grey Plover and Ringed Plover, plus likely encounters of Avocets, Black-tailed Godwits and a Whimbrel. We will scan the sea and hope to find small gatherings of the beautiful Slavonian Grebes. Red-breasted Mergansers and Goldeneye can often be found near the harbour mouth.

We will spend the afternoon searching for a recent coloniser to the county – the Cattle Egret. In 2020, this species bred for its first time in the county, and recent numbers have indicated that this species is here to stay! Elsewhere, a trip to Selsey Bill for a short seawatch may reveal the regular Gannets and Sandwich Terns, and there are normally a few Great Northern Divers present too. Various creeks and river channels will also be checked later on in the day for a greater variety of waders; diligent searches can reveal a Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, and maybe even a Water Pipit!

Your tour leader will keep an eye on the local bird news and if anything of particular interest is found on route then we may decide to take a look!

We will return to the hotel for dinner.

### Day 3

The area of heathland in the NW section of West Sussex are the home to a healthy population of Dartford Warblers that are often found within close proximity to the many Stonechats that also reside here. Although unlikely, there is an outside chance that a Great Grey Shrike may winter on one of the heaths. Siskins, Redpolls, Crossbills, Redwings and Fieldfares are all likely encounters, whilst Woodlarks on a warm winter day may also have started singing - surely one of the UK's most beautiful birdsongs.

After lunch, we will drive down to an area of expansive woodland where we will stand in situ waiting for one of the shyest species of bird on the British list – the Hawfinch. This attractive bird in good winters

can be seen at their pre-roost gatherings in flocks of up to 50 birds! However, smaller number still reside here in poor winters, so checking the hornbeam will hopefully pay dividends. The expected woodland species here include Marsh Tit, Treecreeper, Nuthatch and Jays, whilst there is always an outside chance of a Goshawk, though Red Kites are almost guaranteed here!

It's only a short drive back to the hotel, so there will be plenty of time to relax before our dinner.

## Day 4

Today will see us birdwatching the Arun Valley. This superb area is split into valley fields, farmland and brooks, the latter exceptional for winter gatherings of wildfowl: Pintail, Shoveler, Teal and Wigeon are in their thousands, and we will search the area for the scarce Bewick's Swan(!) – this species is now a scarce winter visitor to Sussex, but winter gatherings still exist on an annual basis.

It is only until recently that the Arun Valley has laid host of wintering White-tailed Eagles (recently introduced to the Isle of Wight). Two birds are regularly encountered now on the brooks, and will surely be an exciting encounter if we were to find them.

We will walk around a lake where Mandarin Duck and Firecrest are in good numbers, as well as common birds that show very well here, most notably, Pochard! A lovely pub or locally-purchased lunch will be had overlooking the brooks.

After lunch, we will ascend to nearby farmland and from here we will walk a circular route hoping to bump into one of the Grey Partridge coveys. Red Kites dominate the sky here, as do Common Buzzards and perhaps a Hen Harrier or Short-eared Owl. Common farmland birds include Corn Bunting, Linnet, Skylark and Reed Bunting.

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## Day 5

Our options for our final day can be flexible depending on our successes so far during our short holiday. After our final breakfast and having packed our bags, an option would be to head for Thorney Island.

This military base has a pathway on it's outskirts, meaning one can circumnavigate the island. Although we won't be doing this (roughly an 8-mile loop), we can scour both sides of the seawall to view the myriad wader species and the hoards of Brent Geese which winter here.

The 'Deeps' also hold on to fine concentrations of Eurasian Wigeon and Teal, while Golden Plover and Curlew are usually found in the grasses. Short-eared Owls are regular winter visitors, but these can be elusive depending on how the local rodent population is getting on.

We will try and finish the day around 3pm, allowing plenty of time to return back to the hotel, and go on our separate ways after what will have been an excellent tour to West Sussex.

## Transport

We will be travelling in a 9-seater minibus during this tour which your tour leader will drive and in which we will carry seven group members.

## Tour grading

**Grade A.** There will be no serious or strenuous walking on this tour, with each walk covering no more than a couple of miles on mostly gentle terrain.

## Food & accommodation included in the price

Accommodation, breakfasts and dinners are included in the cost. Lunches (either in the form of a pub lunch or a picnic) and drinks are not included. Accommodation will be in a country-style pub/small hotel, situated within easy reach of the key birdwatching sites.

## Clothing and Equipment

Binoculars are essential. Bring a telescope if you have one, since it will be useful for scanning the wetlands. Since it can be muddy and wet underfoot, we would suggest you bring waterproof walking boots and a pair of wellies for exceptional circumstances. Please check the forecast before travel and dress accordingly. Wellies can be left in the vehicle.

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk).

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