

Winter in The New Forest

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Meet at the hotel in the evening. Dinner.
- Day 2** Exploration of the New Forest. Bishop's Dyke, Beaulieu Heath.
- Day 3** Pennington and Keyhaven reserves. Depart for home mid-afternoon.

Departs

Late February/early March

Focus

General Natural History of the New Forest

Grading

Grade A –easy day walks.

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GBR15)

Highlights:

- Goshawks begin their roller-coaster display flights
- Dartford Warbler and Great Grey Shrike present in winter
- Hawfinch, Crossbill, Stonechat, Redpoll & Meadow Pipit
- Brambling amongst roving winter finch flocks
- Brent Goose, Red-breasted Merganser, Eider
- Led by an expert naturalist



From top to bottom: Brambling, the New Forest and Hawfinch



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Introduction

The New Forest is one of the most important ecological areas in Britain, its value having recently been officially recognised by its designation as a National Park. It comprises a vast area of rolling heathland, mixed forest and damp boggy hollows, covering some 144 square miles of south-west Hampshire and south-east Dorset. 'The Forest', as it is known locally, is still managed under a pastoral system, incorporating ancient grazing rights and periodic controlled burnings of the heathland. Indeed, it is this age old form of management that has both created and conserved the New Forest's unique ecological richness and diversity.

Over the past 150 years Britain has lost almost 80% of its lowland heathland and today the New Forest holds the largest and most important area remaining in the country. As a result it contains a huge variety of rare species of animals and plants. Whilst the majority of wildlife enthusiasts visit in the spring and early summer, there is much to enjoy in the winter too. Free from the tourist crowds that descend at warmer times, 'The Forest' reclaims its wild and ancient charm during the winter months; a beauty accentuated by a hard frost on the trees or a sprinkling of snow on the ground. Hardy little Dartford Warblers remain on the heaths all year and these are joined in the winter by Hen Harriers and the occasional Great Grey Shrike. Hawfinches are more easily seen in trees free from leaves, whilst roving winter finch flocks frequently hold Brambling. Goshawks start their roller-coaster display in late February and Merlin, Crossbill, Lesser-spotted Woodpecker are also possible. For this new weekend break we will base ourselves in the pretty New Forest town of Lyndhurst. From here we will not only explore the inland portion of the New Forest National Park, but also spend time birdwatching around the marshes and lagoons along the Solent in search of wintering Brent Geese, Little Egrets, Peregrine, grebes, divers and a variety of waders.

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

Meet Forest Lodge Hotel

We will meet at our hotel for an evening meal and subsequent drinks in the bar, providing the chance to get to know everyone. Your tour leader, will then give you a short introductory talk on the history and ecology of the New Forest and outline the plan for the weekend.

Day 2

Following breakfast we will begin our exploration of the New Forest with a drive to Beaulieu Road. The Bishop's Dyke/Beaulieu Heath complex supports the widest possible variety of New Forest habitats, including wet acidic bog with willow carr, dry heath, woodland borders with grazed forest

lawn and broad-leaved woodland. As such, this is one of the prime areas for many of the region's rare and localised wintering and resident species in particular Hen Harrier and Great Grey Shrike. Small numbers of Great Grey Shrikes return to The Forest every winter and take up residence on the more extensive heaths. Despite their habit of sitting on the tops of bushes and small trees, they can be very mobile and surprisingly tricky to find. Your leader will keep an eye on the local bird news on the run up to the tour, however, so at least we will know the location of recent sightings and the likely spots to scan. Common Buzzards are a more frequent sight circling over nearby Denny Wood, whilst Dartford Warblers are often seen perched in patches of gorse or flying rapidly low over the heather. The New Forest remains the stronghold for the Dartford Warbler and contains half of the UK population. We will be keeping our fingers crossed for a calm sunny day, for 'Dartfords' are a fair weather species who tend to hide away if conditions are poor. They should, however, be starting to sing and display by late February and so we should keep an ear open for their scratchy song and an eye peeled for their vertical display flights. Commoner heathland species to look out for include Stonechat, Meadow Pipit and Common Crossbill, the latter frequently seen perched atop the patches of Scots Pine.

The heaths are ringed by extensive tracts of deciduous and coniferous woodland. The ancient beech and oaks of Denny Wood hold good numbers of wintering woodland birds, including all 3 species of woodpecker (Green, Great Spotted and Lesser Spotted), Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Marsh Tit, Siskin, Redpoll, Fieldfare, Redwing and if the beech mast crop has been good, large flocks of Chaffinch. These flocks - which can be hundreds strong on occasion - should be carefully checked for Bramblings. Numbers of these attractive orange finches fluctuate from winter to winter, but if we're patient in our scanning we should be lucky!

Following lunch in one of the New Forests excellent pubs, we will move a little way north to Acres Down. The open heathlands and woodlands hold a similar selection of species to Beaulieu Road, but our attention here should be overhead for this site has long been renowned as the best vantage point in the New Forest from which to see birds of prey. By sitting and looking over the vast expanse of forest around us we hope to see one of the UK rarest raptors, the Goshawk. This powerful predator hunts within the woodland canopy, dashing between the branches and trees in the hope of surprising a Wood Pigeon, crow or squirrel. In the late winter and early spring, however, they can be often be seen soaring over the more extensive tracts of woodland engaging in their impressive 'roller-coaster' display flight. Common Buzzards are also frequently seen here along with Sparrowhawks, whilst Merlin and Hen Harrier are occasionally recorded. The woodlands of Acres Down are another excellent spot to look for finch flocks.

Around mid-afternoon we will make our way to the Blackwater Arboretum along the Rhinefield Ornamental Drive and walk a short distance to a small woodland glade. This area regularly holds a winter roost of Hawfinches, so we need to be in position around an hour or so before dark and crane our necks upwards to look at the tree-tops. The Blackwater Arboretum offers one of the best opportunities in the UK to obtain clear, unobstructed, views of this impressive, but shy and secretive species. Crossbill, Redpoll, Siskin and Brambling are also possible. As darkness starts to fall we will make our way back to the hotel.

Day 3

This morning we will turn our attention away from the woodlands and heaths to enjoy the saltmarsh and coastal lagoons of the Pennington and Keyhaven nature reserves. The coastline of the Solent around Lymington attracts internationally important numbers of wading birds and waterfowl every winter and offers an interesting contrast to the habitats and wildlife further inland. Large numbers of Brent Geese winter here along with plenty of the commoner duck species such as Shoveler, Teal and Gadwall. Flocks of wheeling Dunlin are a common sight on the intertidal flats and they are joined by Curlew, Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Knot and one or two over-wintering Greenshank. Red-breasted Mergansers, Great Crested Grebe, Eider and the occasional diver and Slavonian Grebe - or even Red-necked Grebe - feed offshore. Little Egrets are also a common sight here (who would believe they were such a rarity only a few decades ago!).

We will take a quick lunch at another local pub before deciding how to spend our remaining few hours. The exact itinerary will be fairly flexible and dependent on what species we have seen and those we have missed. There are additional sites to explore for Dartford Warbler or perhaps we could venture to the north of the Forest to look for Mandarin Ducks on Eyeworth Pond or scan another heath or two for Great Grey Shrike and Hen Harrier. Around 4/4.30pm we will depart for home.

Tour grading

There will be no serious or strenuous walking, with easy walks of a maximum of 3 miles per walk on gentle terrain.

Focus

The general natural history of the New Forest.

Food & accommodation included in the price

Accommodation, breakfasts and dinners are included in the cost. Pub lunches and drinks are not included.

Clothing and Equipment

Binoculars are essential. Bring a telescope if you have one, since it will be useful for the raptor-watching session and for scanning the open heaths. Since it can be muddy underfoot we would suggest you bring waterproof walking boots. Wellington boots may also be useful at times.

Transport

We use 9-seat minibuses for this tour. Please assist our tour leaders in ensuring that there is a rotation of seats around the tour vehicle to allow each tour member to enjoy approximately equal time in the front. In order to be fair to all participants, we regret that we are unable to guarantee a perpetual front seat to those who might suffer from motion sickness or other concerns.

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, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.

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