

# South Devon in Winter

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

**Day 1** Arrive Torquay

**Day 2/4** Visit Exe Estuary, Exe Marshes, Dawlish Warren, East Devon Pebble-bed Heaths & Haldon Hills

### Departs

November, December, January, February or March

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR19) or brochure

### Grading

A. Easy day walks.

### Focus

Birds and general natural history

### Highlights

- Impressive flocks of wintering wildfowl & waders
- Black-tailed & Bar-tailed Godwits, plus sea-ducks such as Common Scoter
- Many hundreds of wintering Avocets
- Large flocks of Brent Geese
- Chance of seeing Dartford Warbler & Great Grey Shrike on Devon heaths
- Divers, grebes & sea-ducks at the mouth of the estuary
- Possibility of seeing one of South Devon's special birds, the rare Cirl Bunting
- Expert naturalist tour leader



Images from top: Kingfisher, Short-eared Owl & Avocet (Dave Smallshire)



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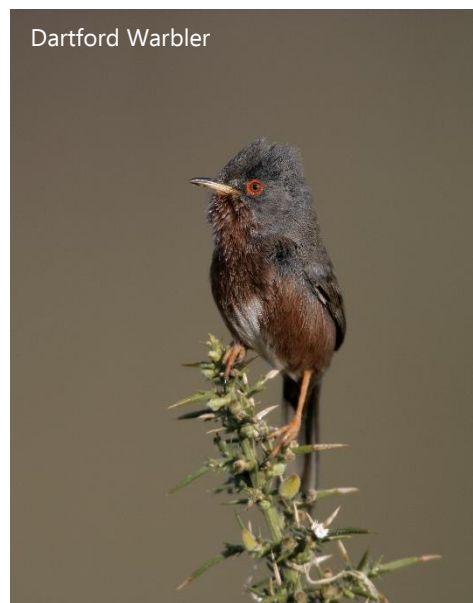
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## Introduction

The countryside around South Devon's Exe Estuary contains some of Britain's best wildlife experiences in a remarkably small area. Between sea level and the hilltops of Great Haldon there is an amazing range of high quality wildlife habitats, including heathland, mature conifers, grazing marshes, cliffs, estuaries, saltmarsh and sand dunes. These are closely related to the underlying geology, which ranges from the Old Red Sandstone of the Exe Valley, Greensand capped by flint gravels on Haldon Hills, the alluvial deposits at the head of the estuary and the Bunter Sandstones of the East Devon Pebble-bed Heaths.

The Exe Estuary and its marshes is a mecca for birds and birdwatchers alike. Over 20,000 wildfowl, waders and other waterbirds congregate here in winter, making it a wetland of international importance. As a result, the whole of the estuary and its associated grazing marsh is designated as a Special Protection Area under the EC Birds Directive. A large area of heathland on the East Devon Pebble-beds is also regarded as of international importance for its wildlife, including such birds as Dartford Warbler.

In this relatively mild part of Britain, a fine mixture of resident and winter migrant birds can be found in mid-winter. Our leader regularly finds over 100 species of birds here in a full winter's day! Further, two of the resident birds are highly prized by British birdwatchers; both Cirl Bunting and Dartford Warbler are found here. The coastal belt of South Devon became the sole remaining breeding ground for Cirl Bunting in Britain when its population declined dramatically to barely 100 pairs. Fortunately, this species has responded to conservation efforts and numbers are much healthier now, though its range is still very restricted and we will be looking for it at its very eastern edge. While Cirl Buntings rely on seeds for their winter diet, Dartford Warblers seek out a diet of invertebrates beneath a canopy of heather and gorse on nearby heathland. We'll hope for some calm, sunny weather to tempt the warblers out from their sheltered haunts.



Dartford Warbler

## 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

## Arrive Torquay



Hen Harrier

This short break starts and ends at Torquay Train Station, which is just 50 metres from our beach front hotel! We will meet at the hotel at approximately 1pm (timing to be confirmed in the final joining instructions). The programme for this afternoon and the next three days will be kept flexible, in order to make best use of the prevailing weather conditions and tides and to maximise our chances of seeing key species. Our time will be divided between the estuary margins and wetlands on both sides, the coast at Dawlish Warren, the East Devon Heaths and selected areas of nearby farmland. However, the whole area is good for wildlife and

there will be many opportunities to stop as we drive between sites. Our tour leader knows the area extremely well and will make decisions on the day as to exactly where we will go. This afternoon, we will visit some local sites, aiming to finish around dusk in order to try and catch a Hen Harrier or Merlin coming to roost, or perhaps a Short-eared Owl hunting.

## Days 2 – 4

The main areas we are likely to visit are described below:

### Exe Estuary

The estuary and its associated grazing marshes are most famous for large flocks of wintering birds, such as Avocet and Black-tailed Godwit. The views can be spectacular, especially when the large wintering flock of Avocets wheels around in unison. At favoured high tide roost sites, waders such as Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Knot, Sanderling, Redshank, Greenshank and Turnstone gather to rest, bathe and



Avocets

preen before the falling tide allows them to feed again. Thousands of Brent Geese and dabbling ducks like Wigeon, Teal, Pintail and Shoveler winter on the estuary and marshes, while fish attract dozens of Little Egrets, Red-breasted Mergansers, Cormorants, Shags and even Kingfishers to feed in the estuary channels. These piscivores are often joined by a few Great Northern Divers and grebes, including Slavonian, and other normally sea-dwelling birds like Long-tailed Duck. We'll check through the large numbers of commoner gulls for unusual species like Mediterranean Gull.

### Exe Marshes

Once a tidal part of the estuary, extensive areas of flat, wet grassland now cover the land between the City of Exeter and the tidal defences of the estuary. Many birds move between these freshwater habitats and the brackish waters of the estuary, but not the resident Cetti's Warbler, whose song explodes from marshy fringes. Here they can find plentiful midges during the winter, a food source

that also helps to satisfy other birds of the marshes, such as Stonechat and Water Pipit. These, and other small birds, often attract a Merlin, while Short-eared Owls can sometimes be seen late in the day if vole numbers are high. Nearby farmland, especially where weedy stubbles have been left over the winter, is where we'll search for Cirl Buntings and perhaps find some of the Woodlarks that are resident here.

## Dawlish Warren

A visit to South Devon would not be complete without a visit to 'The Warren'. This sand spit, well-known for its ability to turn up rare birds, allows views both into the Exe Estuary and out to sea. At



Slavonian Grebe

high tide, a hide affords excellent views over one of the estuary's main wader roosts, so we'll time our visit here carefully. A Peregrine may well put in an appearance, resulting in a spectacular show of aerobatics from the waders. Out to sea, this shallow part of Lyme Bay has wintering Red-throated Divers, Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes, Common Scoters, Razorbills and sometimes a few Eiders, Velvet Scoters or a Red-necked Grebe. We'll spend time scanning the sea to

look for these, especially if we have calm conditions. Langstone Rock, at the landward end of the spit, has resident Rock Pipits, while scrubby woodland might hold a wintering Firecrest.

## East Devon Pebble-bed Heaths

By contrast, and only a few miles away as the Dartford Warbler flies, these heathlands are the largest expanse of lowland heath in the southwest and one of the largest countrywide. Home not only to a good population of Dartfords, but also its frequent companion, the Stonechat, and in recent years, a regular Great Grey Shrike. The shrike has a large territory and can be quite mobile, but we'll scan lots of conspicuous perches for it, while listening carefully for the giveaway calls of any warbler.

## Haldon Hills

Known for its breeding birds of prey and Nightjars, Haldon also has wintering flocks of Crossbills, Siskins, Redpolls and Bramblings, though all of these are irregular in appearance. This is related to the abundance of the seed crop of their favoured tree species, so a visit here will depend on the amount of seed (and especially time) available. More regular, however, are the Woodcocks that fly out at dusk to feed on earthworms on nearby damp grasslands: waiting for these is a very satisfying, if somewhat chilly, end to a winter's day.



Common Crossbill

After an action-packed tour of winter birdwatching the tour will conclude at the hotel by approximately 4pm.

You may like to consider extending your stay, and we would be happy to assist you with this.

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## Tour Grading

A. There will be some easy walking on this holiday, covering up to three miles per day. However, this will be at a slow pace, on flat or sometimes hilly ground, and will be interspersed with some time spent in hides. As it is a winter break, you will need to be prepared for cold and/or wet conditions.

This tour is suitable for birdwatchers and naturalists of all abilities.

## Accommodation & Food

The holiday cost includes accommodation, half board (breakfast and evening meals) plus guiding and transport. Lunches are not included, nor travel to and from Torquay.

Breakfasts and evening meals are included beginning with the evening meal on Day 1 and finishing with breakfast on Day 4. Lunches are not included. Accommodation will be in en-suite twin or double rooms in a standard tourist hotel, but a limited number of single occupancy rooms may also be available for a supplementary cost.

We will stop for lunch and comfort breaks, but you will need to bring any snacks or drinks that you want during the rest of the day with you as these are not provided.

## Weather

Although South Devon enjoys a milder climate than many parts of Britain, winter can still be bitterly cold and in these exposed habitats the wind chill can make it seem even colder. Snow is possible or heavy rain, but we will hope for a milder interlude during our visit.

## Clothing & Equipment

Warm and waterproof clothing and footwear are essential. Waterproof jacket and trousers should be brought with you. Several thinner layers, as opposed to one thick layer, are the best way to keep warm, and can be removed if the temperature increases. Hat, scarf and gloves are also advisable.

We would recommend that all tour participants bring a pair of binoculars with them. A scope can be useful for the sea watching sessions and the estuary, however, if you don't have your own, your tour leader will have one. A day pack for carrying items and a re-fillable water bottle should be



brought with you. A thermos flask, torch, sunglasses and a chap-stick would be useful items to have.

If you are bringing a camera with you, please ensure that you have a waterproof bag or case to put it in or a weather cover. We would recommend bringing spare batteries as colder weather can reduce the performance and mean that your batteries don't last very long.

## Meeting Information

We will meet at the hotel at 1pm and plan to head out for the afternoon. The hotel is just 50 metres from Torquay Railway station. For anyone travelling by car, the hotel has plenty of parking. Exact details will be in the joining instructions for the tour.

## Inclusions / Exclusions

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- Accommodation in a comfortable hotel on half board basis
- All guiding
- All costs associated with visiting locations mentioned in itinerary.

The following costs are **not** included and should be budgeted for:

- Lunches
- Drinks
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, discretionary tipping, etc.

## 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), 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. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.

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