

The Best of South Devon by Land & Sea

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Arrive Brixham

Day 2/4 Tor Bay, River Dart and River Exe cruises while exploring a variety of habitats of foot.

Day 5 Slapton Ley and depart in afternoon

Departs

November - March

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR277)

Grading

A. Easy day walks & boat trips

Focus

Birds and general natural history

Leader

Mike Langman

Highlights

- Special chartered cruises out into Tor Bay and along the River Dart
- A special cruise along the River Exe
- Cetaceans possible within Tor Bay
- Large flocks of Brent Geese and Avocets
- Wintering divers, grebes & sea-ducks
- A South Devon specialty. The rare Cirl Bunting
- A fantastic range of species including waders, wildfowl, warblers, gulls and more.
- Superb Hotel on Berry Head itself
- Led by a local expert Mike Langman.



Avocet, Great Northern Diver, Common Dolphin



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Introduction

Devon's south coast is a remarkably rewarding area for birdwatching and through the winter months the area holds the largest number of birds. Thousands of birds spend the winter in the region finding refuge in and around the Exe and Dart Estuary and the various sheltered bays and pools along this special stretch of coastline. 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 habitats 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. Situated on Berry Head itself, our base for this exciting holiday overlooks the bustling fishing port of Brixham. The Berry Head Hotel is perfectly located to explore the area with fantastic views across Tor Bay and set in six acres of private grounds. The hotel also has a swimming pool, jacuzzi and sauna and is a very short walk into Brixham itself. From here we will explore the area taking boat trips and relaxed walks to find a very wide range of species.

On this tour we have three exciting boat trips planned which enable us to explore Tor Bay, the River Dart and the famous Exe Estuary. On our doorstep, Tor Bay provides a fantastic winter refuge for a whole host of special wintering species including various grebes, divers, and sea ducks while we can also hope to encounter cetaceans too with Common and Bottlenose Dolphins and Harbour Porpoise all regularly seen. The cliffs of Berry Head are a superb place to find migrant birds as well as the overwintering species which by now will have formed flocks, making them easier to find.

The Exe Estuary and its marshes are a mecca for birds and birdwatchers alike. Over 20,000 wildfowl, waders and other waterbirds congregate here from October onwards, 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 and we will explore the Exe Estuary by boat to enjoy a superb range species, often in huge numbers.

Our third boat trip will see us taking a cruise along the scenic River Dart on another private charter to enjoy special views of the area and coastline where we will find waders, wildfowl, seabirds and possibly cetaceans too.



Torbay boat trip

In this relatively mild part of Britain, a fine mixture of resident and wintering migrant birds can be found. In addition, the highly sought-after Cirl Bunting is relatively abundant and can be found in

good numbers. We shall visit a special Cirl Bunting feeding station which was established by our tour leader.

We will stop off at heathland sites as we attempt to find Dartford Warblers and a visit to Slapton Ley, the largest natural lake in the south-west, will provide a range of wintering wildfowl and seabirds just offshore. With such a range of habitats to explore by land and time spent at sea, it is set to be a most varied and exciting exploration of the area.



Berry Head

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 Brixham

This 5-day holiday commences at the superb Berry Head Hotel in Brixham, which will be our base for the next four nights. Set on Berry Head itself, overlooking Tor Bay we are perfectly positioned with wonderful views and Brixham on our doorstep. If required, we can pick you up from Paignton Train Station and in the early evening we will all gather for a lovely dinner and to discuss our plans for the exciting days ahead.

Days 2 – 4

Over the next 3 days we will be exploring the very best of the surrounding area with activities on foot and three planned boat trips each lasting between 2-3 hours. The walks will be at a relaxed, naturalists' pace as we hope to take in and enjoy everything we find. The key areas and boat trips are outlined below, and some flexibility is included in the itinerary to allow us to respond to the latest local sightings.

Exe Estuary and River Cruise

The Exe 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 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. Great Northern Divers and grebes, including Slavonian, and other normally sea-dwelling birds like



Brent Geese

Long-tailed Duck move into the estuary and just offshore in the winter. As well as watching over the estuary enjoying this special range of species, we will also take an exciting 3-hour cruise to appreciate the area by boat and this provides a superb way of getting close to the birdlife. We will depart from Exmouth and travel along the Exe and explore this wonderful estuary for birdlife.

Tor Bay

Tor Bay, being east facing, provides a very welcome shelter for wintering species wishing to keep out of the harsher conditions further offshore. During the tour we will be looking out for a range of species here which may include all three of our regularly occurring divers: Great Northern, Red-throated and Black-throated along with a range of grebes which often include Black-necked, Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes with the more common Great-crested. Sea ducks such as Common and Velvet Scoter and Long-tailed Duck may also be encountered. As well as viewing the bay from land, we will take an exciting, privately chartered, cruise around these calm waters with the aim to obtain close views of the species previously mentioned as well as seabirds including

Gannets, Guillemots, Shags and possibly a late skua. The trip will last around 2.5 hours and we will spend time in the bay and venture a little way offshore around Berry Head where we have a good chance of encountering cetaceans with Harbour Porpoise, Bottlenose Dolphin and Common Dolphin all frequently seen here. The joy of heading out by boat is that the wildlife is relatively undisturbed by our presence, enabling us to obtain excellent views of the wildlife on offer. Steep cliffs are usually the resting grounds for Peregrine Falcons and Grey Seals may be resting up on the rocks.

Berry Head and Brixham



Cirl Bunting (Mike Langman)

For over 45 years our leader Mike Langman has adopted Berry Head as his 'local patch' and as such he knows intimately the best locations and sites on which to focus. Walking along Brixham Breakwater – which separates the harbour from the bay – can be very productive for wintering divers and holds one of Tor Bay's last wintering sites for Purple Sandpipers, which are usually accompanied by Turnstones and Rock Pipits and often afford close views. The working fishing port here attracts many species of gull including Mediterranean

Gull and sometimes Iceland Gull, and Grey Seals can also often be seen here. A slow walk up to Berry Head via the woodlands, mostly made up of sycamore, are a favourite haunt for hungry warblers, tits and crests and reaching the headland we will walk out to the old coast guard station and lighthouse. From here we'll scan the sea for any passing seabirds or cetaceans. Divers, auks and skuas may pass by offshore and Berry Head has an excellent reputation for sightings of Common Dolphins and Harbour Porpoises. The isolated scrub on the headland can hold resting or sheltering migrant birds, typically Goldcrest, Chiffchaffs and perhaps Firecrest or even Yellow-browed Warbler! The southern slopes of the northern headland, we'll look out for resident Stonechat, mobile tit flocks and thrushes and Black Redstart may also be found. We will also be sure to look out over the Guillemot colony as birds come back to roost during the late afternoon. We will also visit a feeding station nearby which Mike set up in 2003 for Cirl Bunting and we can hope and expect to have great views and excellent photographic opportunities. The coastal belt of South Devon became the sole remaining breeding ground for this species 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.

The River Dart and Man Sands

The estuary of the River Dart and the surrounding habitats hold a superb array of wintering wildlife that seek shelter in the estuary itself and calm bays. We will take a chartered 2.5-hour cruise along

the river which will take us past the scenic towns of Dartmouth and Kingswear, and on past Agatha Christie's Greenway summer home and the village of Dittisham, with us scanning for exciting wildlife along the way. Species we hope to encounter should include such estuary waders as Curlew, Redshank, Oystercatcher and perhaps even a Mediterranean Gull. There will be plenty of Shelduck and, with luck, small numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers, Kingfisher and Little Egrets. Both Grey Seal and the much rarer (in the south-west) Harbour Seal regularly haul out on pontoons or rocks while Peregrine Falcon, Buzzard, Raven, Common Scoter and Gannet are all possible. Wintering Great Northern Divers and Black Redstarts may well feature and we have a good chance of finding Harbour Porpoise and Common Dolphin as we head out of the estuary into open water if conditions allow. Following the cruise we will once again be exploring the area with relaxed walks and after a short drive, we will visit the excellent National Trust Reserve of Man Sands. This small wetland reserve holds wintering wildfowl, Water Rail, Snipe, Cetti's Warbler and regular wintering Chiffchaff and Firecrest. Both Cirl Bunting and Yellowhammer feed in the surrounding pastoral fields.

Day 5 - Slapton Ley and Depart

Slapton Ley is the largest natural lake in the south-west of England and the fact that it is purely fresh water is all the more surprising given that it is only separated from the sea by a narrow shingle belt. Here we can expect to see a range of common ducks and other waterfowl plus hopefully some scarcer species including Goldeneye, Scaup and Black-necked Grebe while in recent years a Ring-necked Duck has spent the winter here. Sometimes a Marsh Harrier appears coasting over the reeds whilst Sparrowhawks and Peregrines are often to be seen, the latter scattering the Tufted Ducks, Coots and Gulls out on the water. The reedbeds and willow thickets hold Cetti's Warblers and Water Rails, both more often heard than seen and there's often wintering Firecrests amongst the flocks of Long-tailed Tits and Goldcrests that roam through the woodland. Cirl Buntings can be seen here too, singing from the hedgerows in fine weather and in most years recently there's been a wintering Bittern. Excitingly, Slapton also remains one of the very best places in South Devon to encounter an Otter. They are often seen from Slapton bridge as they swim along the narrow channel that links the upper and lower sections of the lake or out fishing on the open ley itself.



Black-necked Grebe

Looking offshore across Start Bay towards Start Point we have a good chance of seeing Great Northern or Red-throated Divers, Common Scoter, Razorbills, Gannets and if we're lucky, a Harbour Porpoise, Grey Seal or even a pod of Common Dolphins. The flocks of Gulls loafing on the beach are always worth a look too as Mediterranean Gulls and regular and there's always the chance of

something more unusual, a Little Gull perhaps or even a Glaucous or Iceland Gull. If conditions look promising, we will take a short visit to Start Point which can often be excellent for migrants, passing seabirds and perhaps even Atlantic Bluefin Tuna which have been seen more frequently in recent years.

Following a fantastic holiday and exploration of south Devon, we will aim to be back in Brixham at around 4.30-5pm to say our farewells.

Tour Grading

A. There will be some easy walking on this holiday, covering around 3-5 miles per day. However, this will be at a slow pace, on flat or sometimes hilly ground. This tour is suitable for birdwatchers and naturalists of all abilities.

Accommodation & Food

The holiday cost includes accommodation at the excellent Berry Head Hotel in Brixham with half-board (breakfast and evening meals) plus guiding and transport. Lunches are not included, nor travel to and from Brixham. A lift is offered from Paignton train station.

Breakfasts and evening meals are included beginning with the evening meal on Day 1 and finishing with breakfast on Day 5. Lunches are not included and we will stop for lunch at either a café, pub or local supermarket each day and please feel free to bring any snacks or drinks that you want during the rest of the day. Accommodation will be in en-suite twin or double rooms. There are upgrades available on request to sea-view rooms and we often have 2-3 true single rooms available if you wanted to avoid the single room supplement.

The hotel also has a swimming pool, sauna and jacuzzi.

Meeting Arrangements

You are welcome to check in to the hotel from 3pm and your leader will meet you at 6pm for an outline to the days ahead before dinner. There is parking available at the hotel for those driving. For those arriving by train, Mike can pick you up from Paignton train station at 3pm.

Weather



Mediterranean Gull (Mike Langman)

Although South Devon enjoys a milder climate than many parts of Britain, the winter months can still be chilly.

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 highly recommended.

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 also be brought with you. A thermos flask and torch would be useful items to have. Sunglasses and a chap-stick may also be useful.

If you are bringing a camera with you, please ensure that you have a waterproof bag or case to put this in or a weather cover.

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

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Berry Head Hotel