

# Northumberland – Birds & History

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

**Day 1** Newcastle to Hexham

**Day 2** Housesteads

**Day 3** Geltsdale; Vindolanda

**Day 4** Chesters; Corbridge; Newcastle

### Departs

June

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR364) for up-to-date dates and prices.

### Grading

B/C. Gentle walks of up to 9 miles. Terrain can be steep and rocky in places, but mostly undulating.

### Focus

Birds & History

### Highlights

- Be immersed in Roman history with walks along Hadrian's Wall
- Look to the skies for raptor species such as Peregrine Falcon, Merlin and Buzzards
- Visit RSPB Geltsdale to see their conservation projects in action
- Breeding waders: Curlew, Snipe, Redshank
- Warblers abound! Willow, Grasshopper, Common Whitethroat
- Ring Ouzel and Black Grouse possible
- Visits to the Roman Army Museum and other important Roman archeological sites, such as Vindolanda, Chesters and Corbridge



Images from top: Peregrine Falcon, Hadrian's Wall, Black Grouse (courtesy of Shutterstock)



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk



## Introduction

Northumberland, the northernmost English county, is a treasure trove of historical and wildlife delights with castles seemingly in every town, Roman archaeological sites still being uncovered, and Hadrian's Wall traversing through. On this 4-day trip, there is much wildlife and ancient history to discover along the way as we retrace the steps of the Roman Army.

The tour begins in Newcastle and from here we transfer west to a comfortable hotel in Hexham, a stone's throw away from Hexham Abbey. During the following days we will explore different sites along Hadrian's Wall, starting with Segedunum Roman Fort & Museum at the eastern end of the wall, with its reconstructed fort and informative interpretation centre. There may also be time to explore the Great North Museum, home to extensive Roman collections, before relaxing with an evening meal at our hotel. There will be opportunities to see more of Hexham and stroll along the River Tyne, with chances to spot Kingfishers, Dippers, and warblers.



Putting ourselves in the shoes (or rather, the sandals) of the Romans, we will follow Hadrian's Wall on foot, beginning with an introduction at the Roman Army Museum and Magna Roman Fort before continuing the route westward toward Housesteads Fort – a 9-mile walk through some of Britain's most striking countryside. Along the way, we can admire the now infamous Sycamore Gap, enjoy sweeping views, and look out for wildlife including Curlew, Buzzard, Kestrel, and Peregrine, as well as a variety of wildflowers and butterflies.



Day three will take us to Geltsdale Nature Reserve, an upland reserve of heather moorland, bog and woodland, home to breeding waders, Black Grouse, birds of prey, warblers and ongoing conservation projects including peatland restoration and Red Squirrel protection. The journey concludes with visits to Chesters Museum and Corbridge Roman Town, both offering well-preserved

remains and engaging exhibits, before returning to Newcastle Station. We hope to deliver a historical discovery, scenic walking and superb opportunities for wildlife observation on this Great British short break.

## Itinerary

*NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather, tides & 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

### Hexham

The meeting place to begin the tour will be Newcastle Railway Station at 1200 but precise details for the meeting arrangements will be contained in the tour joining instructions, which will be sent approximately three weeks before the tour. Airport pick-ups are also available; please contact the Naturetrek office to arrange if required.

Summer is an exciting time to be birdwatching in Northumberland. The majority of summer visitors are back in their breeding areas along with the resident nesting birds, whilst there is always the possibility of encountering one or two more unusual migrants. Birdsong is at a peak and with the onset of summer, the emerging flora once again paints the countryside with splashes of colour.

We'll begin our journey at the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall, where we'll visit Segedunum Roman Fort & Museum, part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site that spans this iconic Roman



frontier. Built around 122 AD, Segedunum once guarded the eastern gateway to the wall and was home to around 600 Roman soldiers. For nearly three centuries, it stood as a powerful symbol of Roman strength and control at the very edge of their empire. At the site, we will take in panoramic views from the 35-metre-high viewing tower, which offers a spectacular perspective over the excavated fort and the surrounding landscape. We'll also have the chance to stand on a reconstructed section of Hadrian's Wall, giving us a real sense of the scale and craftsmanship of this monumental structure. Inside the museum, we can explore interactive exhibits, detailed models, and archaeological artefacts that bring the story of Roman life on the frontier vividly to life. If time allows, we'll also make a stop at the Great North Museum: Hancock in Newcastle. Here, we'll find a remarkable collection of archaeological treasures from across the 73-mile stretch of Hadrian's Wall – including altars, inscriptions, and personal items that shed light on the daily lives of the people who once lived and served along the wall.

After a full day of travel and exploration, we'll head west to Hexham, where we'll check in at the charming Beaumont Hotel, a beautifully restored Victorian townhouse offering comfort and

character. The hotel enjoys lovely views of Hexham Abbey, founded in the 7th century, and is just a short walk from the historic town centre. During our stay, there will be opportunities for gentle walks along the River Tyne and nearby woodlands, where we may spot Kingfishers, Dippers, warblers, Pied Flycatchers and, with a bit of luck, the elusive Nightjar or Woodcock as dusk falls.

## Day 2

## Housesteads

We'll begin the day with a short drive to Brampton, where we'll visit Magna Roman Fort and the Roman Army Museum, located beside one of the most complete and scenic stretches of Hadrian's Wall. This is an excellent place to step back in time and gain a deeper understanding of life on Rome's northern frontier. Through impressive exhibits, immersive film, and fascinating artefacts, we'll learn more about Emperor Hadrian himself and the soldiers who built and guarded the wall nearly 2,000 years ago. Highlights of the museum include the only known surviving Roman helmet crest and an astonishing set of hipposandals – the ancient equivalent of horseshoes – both remarkably preserved.

After exploring the museum, we'll embark on a 9-mile walk to Housesteads Fort, following the line of Hadrian's Wall through some of the most stunning landscapes in northern England. Our journey will be taken at a gentle, steady pace, allowing plenty of time to enjoy the scenery and wildlife along the way. As we walk, we'll look out for upland waders such as Curlew and Redshank, and passerines including Stonechat and Meadow Pipit. Overhead, birds of prey often soar on the summer thermals – Buzzards and Kestrels are frequent sightings, and with luck, we might even glimpse a Peregrine Falcon or Merlin on the hunt. Closer to the ground, we'll take time to appreciate the colourful array of wildflowers that brighten the grasslands and the butterflies that flit among them, adding to the sense of tranquillity along our route. One of our most poignant stops will be at the site of the former Sycamore Gap tree, once one of Britain's most photographed landmarks. Here, we'll pause to reflect on its history, its loss, and the natural regeneration now taking place in this iconic landscape.



Merlin

During our walk, there may be a chance to relax and enjoy a well-earned drink at the Twice Brewed Inn in Once Brewed, a welcoming local pub renowned for its award-winning craft beers brewed on-site and the perfect place to toast our adventures amid the rolling Northumberland scenery. After we've explored Housesteads Fort – one of the best-preserved Roman forts along the wall – our tour leader will retrieve the

minibus and take us back to the hotel. There, we'll enjoy a hearty evening meal and the satisfaction of a day well spent, followed by a good night's rest in preparation for the next leg of our Hadrian's Wall adventure.

## Day 3

## Geltsdale & Vindolanda

After breakfast, we will start the day at RSPB Geltsdale, an upland reserve nestled in the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This wild and peaceful landscape of heather moorland, rough grassland, blanket bog, and wooded gills is managed by the RSPB for the benefit of both wildlife and people. Geltsdale is one of the organisation's flagship upland reserves, covering more than 5,000 hectares and showcasing what sensitive land management can achieve. As we explore the sweeping valleys and open hillsides, we'll keep our eyes and ears open for a wonderful array of upland birds. The reserve is one of the best places in northern England to see breeding waders, including Curlew, Snipe, Lapwing and Common Sandpiper. Their distinctive calls and aerial displays are a highlight of spring and early summer on the moors. Birds of prey are also a strong feature here – Merlin, Hen Harrier, Peregrine Falcon, Buzzard and Kestrel all breed on the reserve. The wooded valleys and stream edges provide habitat for smaller birds such as Willow Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler, Common Whitethroat and Tree Pipit. Whinchat and Stonechat perch on fenceposts and bracken, and with luck, we may catch a glimpse of the secretive Ring Ouzel. Geltsdale is also one of the few remaining strongholds for the magnificent Black Grouse, whose conservation is a key focus of RSPB work in the area. Early morning visits can be rewarded with the unforgettable sight and sound of males displaying at traditional leks. RSPB Geltsdale is not only a haven for wildlife but also a living example of landscape-scale conservation. The reserve's team works closely with local farmers to promote nature-friendly grazing and peatland restoration, helping to store carbon, improve water quality and enhance biodiversity. There are ongoing projects to restore blanket bogs, re-wet drained moorland and expand native woodland along the burns, providing shelter and food for insects, birds and mammals. The reserve also supports Red Squirrel conservation and is part of broader efforts to connect upland habitats across the North Pennines.



In the afternoon, we'll travel to Vindolanda, one of the most captivating Roman sites in Britain. This remarkable archaeological site has yielded the famous Vindolanda tablets – thin wooden writing tablets preserved in anaerobic mud for nearly 2,000 years. Among them are the earliest known examples of female handwriting in Britain, alongside personal letters and accounts that vividly capture the daily life of soldiers and their families on the Roman frontier. We'll wander through the excavated ruins, museum and reconstructed buildings, gaining a tangible sense of what life was like along Hadrian's Wall nearly two millennia ago.

## Day 4

## Chesters, Corbridge & Newcastle

On our final morning, we'll have the opportunity to explore a few more highlights along Hadrian's Wall before concluding our trip. Chesters Roman Fort and Museum, set in a picturesque location

beside the River North Tyne, is renowned for its exceptionally well-preserved Roman cavalry barracks, providing an intimate glimpse into the daily lives of soldiers stationed on the northern frontier. The on-site museum houses a remarkable collection of Roman artefacts, including altars, coins, pottery and inscriptions, giving context to the fort's history and the people who lived and worked there. Walking around the fort and along the remnants of the wall itself allows for stunning views of the surrounding countryside, perfect for photography or simply soaking in the atmosphere of this historic landscape.

We may also visit Corbridge, a charming town that was once a major Roman supply town and garrison settlement. The excavations at Corbridge reveal a fascinating mix of military and civilian structures, including granaries, workshops, and the remains of luxurious townhouses. The site's museum displays an impressive array of finds, from tools and household items to personal jewelry and Roman inscriptions, helping bring the story of this frontier settlement vividly to life. The combination of archaeological remains and the town's quaint modern streets offers a unique glimpse of Roman and post-Roman life in the region. Once we have explored these final sites along the wall, we will make our way back to Newcastle Station, enjoying the scenery along the route. Please arrange any forward travel plans after 1400 hours, allowing the group a relaxed morning to fully enjoy the last glimpses of Roman history and the beautiful Northumberland landscapes.

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Images courtesy of Shutterstock.

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## Tour Grading

Grade B/C. We will mostly undertake some gentle wildlife walks during the course of the holiday, but the walk to Housesteads is around 9 miles, about 6-7 hours, of undulating walking, with stops along the way. The terrain here can be steep and rocky in some places

## Focus

The main focus for the tour is birds and history; however, we will also take time to look at some of the other wildlife in the area including mammals, insects and plants as we naturally come across them.

## Weather

Weather in Northumberland is as unpredictable as anywhere else in Britain. We hope for settled warm conditions with little rain, but if a northerly air stream is established it can be much colder and it would be best to check the weather forecasts immediately before the holiday and dress accordingly. Waterproof garments are recommended as rain is always possible, and good, waterproof footwear is also recommended.

## Arrival/Departure Details

We anticipate that the majority of the group will arrive at Newcastle Central Station and so this will be our first meeting point. Exact timings will be confirmed in the tour's final joining instructions

but are likely to be as follows: 1200 hours at Newcastle Central Station and 1245 hours at the first afternoon stop (usually Segedunum). At the end of the tour we expect to return to Newcastle Central Station by 1400 hours. Those departing by rail from Newcastle should arrange trains to depart after this time. As train timings do vary from year to year, we would ask you to contact the Naturetrek office before booking travel arrangements that are unlikely to fit in with the timings mentioned above.

## By Train

We meet you at Newcastle Central Station at 1200 hours at the beginning of the trip (further details will be given in joining instructions sent before the tour). Do not worry if our bus is a few minutes late; parking is difficult in the station and it is easier for us if we are sure everyone is together. At the end of the trip, we will aim to be back at Newcastle Station by 1400 hours.

## By Car

If you come by car, you may drive directly to the first meeting point (Segedunum) and meet the group in the afternoon. Details of time and meeting location will be provided in the final joining instructions for the tour. Alternatively, you can meet the group at the hotel in the evening.

## Accommodation & Food

Accommodation will be in a comfortable hotel with private facilities in each room. The holiday cost is calculated on the basis of sharing a double/twin room but a limited number of single rooms may be available at a supplementary cost. It is in an excellent location for our daily excursions.

Breakfast and evening meals are included in the tour price but lunches are not included. Wherever possible, the leader will try to arrange the programme so that tour members will be able to choose whether to have a meal in a café/pub or a picnic lunch, and anyone preferring the latter option will be able to obtain a packed lunch from the hotel or visit the shop during the day.

## Inclusions/Exclusions

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

- Accommodation in a comfortable hotel on a half board basis
- Transport from Newcastle
- All guiding
- Entry fees for all the sites

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

- Lunches
- Drinks
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, tips

Please bring a water bottle with you that can be re-filled every day. We would recommend having a bottle of around 1 litre in capacity.

## 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 tour hotel, at the time of booking.