

# The Winter Birds of Dumfries & Galloway

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

---

### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Arrive Dumfries, transfer to Glenkens
- 
- Day 2** Solway Coast & Nith Estuary
- 
- Day 3** Loch Ken & Galloway Kite Trail
- 
- Day 4** Loch Ryan & The Rhins
- 
- Day 5** Depart from Dumfries
- 

### Departs

November - February

### Dates and Prices

See [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code GBR66)

### Grading

Grade A. Birding day walks only.

### Focus

Birds, and other wildlife

### Highlights

- Visit some of the area's key wetland sites for waders and wildfowl, including Svalbard Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese
- Watch a variety of divers, grebes & northern ducks at Loch Ryan
- Observe Hen Harrier communal roosts
- Spectacular Red Kite feeding station
- Visit Scotland's best site for Willow Tit
- Possibility of Purple Sandpiper
- Learn from Naturetrek's expert local leaders.



Images from top: Hen Harrier, Greylag Geese & Northern Pintail (courtesy of Shutterstock)





## Introduction

Dumfries and Galloway is the most southerly of the Scottish regions and enjoys a more temperate winter climate than the highlands. During these months it is a haven for large numbers of wildfowl and waders that come to feed on the rich coastal and marshland habitats. On this tour we will visit a number of reserves that host them, including the internationally renowned Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust reserve at Caerlaverock and RSPB Mersehead, as well as Loch Ryan and the Loch Ken – River Dee marshes. Between these locations we will be looking for some of the thousands of geese that over winter here, along with a variety of ducks, waders, grebes and divers. We also hope to encounter some Hen Harriers heading to roost late in the afternoons, and perhaps some other raptors too.

## 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

### Arrive Dumfries, transfer Glenkens

We meet at Dumfries Railway Station at 1330 hours (precise details for the meeting arrangements will be provided in the tour joining instructions approximately three weeks prior to departure). As we leave the town of Dumfries behind and travel west, we pass through pretty countryside with rolling hills, and it's worth keeping an eye out for the local cattle breed – Belted Galloway – with their black coats and white bands around the middle! As we move away from the coast it gets hillier and a little more rugged, with attractive areas of mixed woodland.

We will be based in the delightful village of St John's Town of Dalry (usually shortened to just Dalry), a picturesque location in the hills to the north of Castle Douglas and Loch Ken. Once we've checked in, our main objective this afternoon will be to search for Hen Harriers at a local roost site. If conditions are right, we can hope to see several birds coming in for the night! Hen Harriers are solitary hunters by day, however will roost communally in the winter months, often at the same moorland sites each year. The males are a stunning silver-grey colour with contrasting black 'hands', while the females and juveniles of both sexes are browner, with barred markings on their tails, and known as 'ring-tails', referring to their distinctive white rumps that create a ring of white around the base of the tail. These beautiful birds are, unfortunately, still heavily persecuted, so seeing them will be an incredible



privilege. Other raptors and owls are sometimes encountered near roost sites and we may also see Merlin or Short-eared Owl.

## Day 2

## Solway Coast & Nith Estuary

We begin today with a visit to RPSB Mersehead Reserve, on the Solway Coast, in search of wintering coastal and wetland wildfowl, waders and raptors. The sensitively managed farmland, wetlands, merse (saltmarsh) and woodland together attract a wide variety of wildlife. There are two hides on site, overlooking the shallow pools, and we can also take stroll along the shoreline. We expect to find good numbers of Wigeon, Pintail, Teal, Shoveler, Gadwall, Lapwing, Curlew, Oystercatcher and more. The highlight, however, is likely to be the many Barnacle Geese of the Svalbard race, which overwinter exclusively on the Solway. They are relatively confiding at Mersehead and we should enjoy some impressive views. We may also find Pink-footed, Greylag and occasionally much rarer geese, such as a Red-breasted Goose or a Leucistic Barnacle Goose.



Barnacle Geese

We will also be sure to check out the stubble fields, which host large flocks of farmland birds including Twite, Yellowhammer, Linnet, Skylark and Tree Sparrow. Hopefully a passing raptor on the hunt, such as Peregrine, Merlin or Hen Harrier will send them swirling into the air! Near the visitor centre there is a bird feeder that often has Redpolls and is periodically visited by Red Squirrel too.



Red-breasted Merganser

From here, we will take a short drive to Southernness Point on the Nith Estuary. Southernness Point juts out into the Solway where the River Nith meets the sea and, as well as being a great spot for a little birding, is home to one of Scotland's oldest lighthouses. Plenty of waterfowl gather here, and there is the possibility of Purple Sandpiper too. A vast sandy beach stretches in both directions from the point, creating

stunning views across the firth to the Lakeland hills on a clear day. Wintering waders include Redshank, Knot, Little Egrets, Bar-tailed Godwit and Oystercatcher, along with divers, grebes, auks and scoters.

We'll stop for lunch at the famous WWT reserve at Caerlaverock, and spend the early afternoon enjoying the spectacle of thousands of overwintering geese, swans and ducks that gather here. From the comfortable hides we will see Whooper Swans, Mute Swans, Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Shelduck, and can look for the many Barnacle Geese, Canada Geese, Pink-footed Geese and other wildfowl. Periodically, American Green-winged Teal will turn up here. Walking the trails around the reserve and between the hides, we will be looking out for Redwing, Fieldfare, Coal and Long-tailed Tits, Treecreeper and Goldcrest. Our tour is timed to coincide with high tides, so hopefully we will see waders and wildfowl feeding or coming in to roost at some point during our visit.



Goldeneye

If time allows we will aim to get good views of Goosander and Goldeneye on the Nith around Dumfries as we return to our hotel.

## Day 3

## Loch Ken and Laurieston

This morning will see us at RSPB's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve, which comprises a mosaic of woodlands, wetlands and fresh water. As well as wildfowl, we will look for Willow Tit from a couple of hides; this is Scotland's best location to see these pretty little birds. Red Squirrel are also regularly seen here, as are Red Kite, Nuthatch and Sparrowhawk. Greenland White-fronted Geese and



Red Kite

Icelandic Greylag Geese are found here too, but can sometimes be elusive, so we may also visit the wetlands at Threave to look for them there.

In the early afternoon we will make our way to the nearby hamlet of Laurieston where there is a Red Kite feeding Station and visitor centre. Every day at 2pm, meat is put out for these graceful birds. A good number tend to gather ahead of time and begin

circling the station. We will take our time to enjoy this spectacular feeding frenzy, watching these large raptors circling and diving down at close quarters to grab a choice morsel! A truly memorable experience, with fantastic photographic opportunities.



Weather permitting, we may walk along the short trail up Bellymack Hill, which offers great all-round views and the possibility of Stonechat and other passerines. If preferred, those who wish can remain in the comfort of the visitor centre and enjoy the on-going Red Kite spectacle.

## Day 4

## Loch Ryan & The Rhins

We spend today in the far west of the region, around Loch Ryan. This is Scotland's most extensive shallow sea loch, with large expanses of sandflats that are revealed at low tide, and an excellent location for Red-breasted Mergansers, divers, Slavonian, Great Crested and occasionally Black-necked, Grebes, Twite, Scoter, Scaup, Black Guillemot and Long-tailed Duck. As well as being the most southerly of all the



Golden Plover



Short-eared Owl

sea lochs, and a safe stopping location for a variety of migrating species, it hosts a population of Greylag Geese year round and they are joined in the winter by Pink-footed and Pale-bellied Brent Geese.

Before we return to our hotel, we will visit The Rhins to look for Greenland White-fronted Geese and perhaps more Hen Harriers. The open fields and sandflats of Luce Bay form a good roost site for geese, with large numbers arriving here towards the end of the day; both Barn Owl and Short-eared Owl are possible too.

## Day 5

## Dumfries

We plan a relaxed final morning, enjoying some birding around Glenkens before we must pack up and make our way back towards Dumfries. There may be time to search out a few more Goosander and Goldeneye on the Nith, prior to arriving back at Dumfries Railway Station and going our separate ways.

## Tour grading

Grade A. We will undertake some gentle wildlife walks during the course of the holiday (with any more demanding walks always being optional). It may be wet and muddy underfoot, which can make the paths a bit slippery. Some of our activities will be weather dependant, so we will need to be prepared to be flexible with the itinerary to make the most of the best weather.

## Weather

Weather in Dumfries & Galloway is as unpredictable as anywhere else in Britain at this time of year. It is likely to be quite cold and, although we hope for dry, settled conditions, we should be prepared for some wet weather. Warm, waterproof garments, both jacket and trousers, are recommended as rain is always possible. We would also recommend bringing waterproof boots, such as walking boots, to keep your feet dry.

## Arrival / departure details

We anticipate that the majority of the group will arrive into Dumfries Railway Station and so this will be our first meeting point. Exact timings will be confirmed in the tour final joining instructions, but are likely to be as follows: 1330 hours at Dumfries Railway Station and 1415 hours at the accommodation. At the end of the tour we expect to return to Dumfries Railway Station by 1330 hours. Those departing by rail from Dumfries should arrange trains to depart after these times. 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 at Dumfries Railway Station at 1330hrs at the beginning of the trip (further details will be given in joining instructions sent before the tour). At the end of the trip, we normally return to the station by 1330hrs.

## By Bus

There are a number of buses to Dumfries from Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Stranraer and Carlisle. These normally stop at Whitesands, by the river, which is a short distance from the railway station. A pick up can be arranged from here and will be at a similar time to the station pick up.

## By Car

If you come by car, you are welcome to drive directly to the hotel in St John's Town of Dalry and meet the group in the early afternoon. Address details will be provided in the final joining instructions for the tour.

## Accommodation & Food

Accommodation will be in a small local inn where all rooms have private facilities. A limited number of single rooms are available for a small supplement.

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 group members will be able to choose whether to have a cooked meal or a picnic lunch, and anyone preferring the latter option will be able to visit a shop.

## Inclusions/ Exclusions

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

- Accommodation in comfortable rooms on a dinner, bed & breakfast basis.
- Entrance fees for planned activities.
- Transport for the duration of the tour.
- Expert guiding

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

- Lunches
- Drinks
- Discretionary tipping
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs

## Clothing

The average temperature will be around 4 - 6°C, although it may feel colder higher up or near the coast due to the wind chill factor. We recommend taking warm, windproof and waterproof clothing with you for your holiday, which can be removed or added in layers as required. A good waterproof jacket and waterproof trousers are essential. It would be useful to have hat, scarf and gloves too. It is recommended to check the weather forecast for the region during the week prior to your holiday. Sturdy waterproof footwear such as walking boots or shoes with warm socks are recommended. Gaiters can also be useful.

Comfortable, casual clothing and shoes are suggested for the evenings at the hotel.

## Equipment

The following is our recommendation of general equipment that you should bring with you.

- Binoculars
- Telescope (optional, but highly recommended)
- Thermos Flask
- Personal first aid kit (including tweezers in case of ticks)
- Small rucksack/ day pack
- Wash kit and medication
- Camera & accessories (optional)
- Sun protection (if the forecast is for sunny weather)
- Chapstick/ Lip balm
- Field guide and reading material
- Refillable water bottle



## 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.