

# Belgium in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

26 February – 1 March 2015

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Penduline Tit



Firecrest



Greater White-fronted Goose



Waxwing

Report & images compiled by Gerald Broddelez



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## Day 1

Thursday 26th February

Lille – Stuivenskerke - Zuienkerke – Brugge. Weather: Overcast, showers

Everybody arrived on time with Eurostar and soon we were on our way to Stuivenskerke. Our picnic spot inside the dry hide overlooking a large pond with reedbeds provided the first birds: Shoveler, Teal, Egyptian Goose, Tufted Duck, Marsh Harrier and Common Buzzard.

We then drove around the polders checking for geese and found a good selection including Bean, Barnacle, Greylag and many White-fronted Geese, closely watched by large groups of Curlew and a flock of Golden Plover. Unfortunately it started to rain heavily so we were forced to make a hasty retreat to another coastal area.

We drove to the town of Zuienkerke. Here a group of four Waxwing had been present for quite a while and luckily decided to stay around, allowing us all to see these very smart birds at close range. We could see the red wax on the wings very clearly, and the birds dropped to the ground just a few metres away.

We then searched the surrounding fields, and people in the first car were lucky enough to see a Bittern walking along a reedbed giving good views. Kestrels and Common Buzzards kept us entertained while we waited for the light to fade in the hope of seeing some of the many Short-eared Owl present. Unfortunately the very damp conditions did not help and no owls were seen.

From here it was only a short drive to our hotel where we settled in and had a great typical Belgian meal in a nearby restaurant.

## Day 2

Friday 27th February

Brugge – Wondelgem – Dinant – Hotton. Weather: Cold but dry

After breakfast we had an appointment with a local guide. In two hours he gave us a brief but very interesting look into the history of Brugge. As we explored this stunning city, two Peregrines were seen overhead interacting with each other and a Sparrowhawk was also circling in the much improved conditions.

Following the tour we left Brugge behind us and it was midday when we arrived at Wondelgem, on the outskirts of Ghent. Here we visited a lake bordered with reedbeds. The lake itself held several Gadwall that allowed close views, but it was a group of smart Penduline Tits that kept us entertained for the next hour. We counted nine birds in total, happily feeding on bullrush heads within a few metres of us! We were able to study and compare the differences between the males and females in perfect light. As a bonus we also had wonderful close views of a Siberian Chiffchaff, a rare vagrant in this area. The bird was flycatching and flitting around at the base of the bullrushes with the Penduline Tits above.

After our picnic lunch next to one of the highway gasoline stations we drove to Dinant, the city where the famous Belgian, Adolphe Sax was born. Here we saw a group of five White Storks, and several Kestrels and a Buzzard overhead. From Dinant we drove south towards the Ardennes, stopping en route by the river Outhe and adding a very nice Dipper to the list. We scanned the nearby quarry for the resident Eagle Owl and it was almost dark before the mighty hunter decided to start to call and finally flew overhead giving excellent views.

We arrived at our charming and warm hotel with a log fire in time for a quick freshen up and a wonderful three course dinner.

## Day 3

Saturday 28th February

Famenne – Hautes Fagnes. Weather: Dry and sunny

Those keen to explore from the hotel at first light were up at 7am with Tom. The views from the hotel were stunning and it was a beautifully crisp morning. After scanning the river below we walked the short distance down the road and scanned across a wooded hillside, enjoying the sights and sounds of dawn: Hawfinch was heard and then seen well with at least four birds perched, a distance Black Woodpecker flew over the wood, and flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare flew overhead.

Following breakfast we drove to the Famenne wald woodlands, stopping to buy lunch en route. A short look over the river produced super views of a Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail by the bridge. Once in the forest we did a series of short walks in the mixed Beech and Pine forest. Good numbers of tits were flitting around and Coal, Marsh and Crested Tit all gave good views. Nuthatches were as vocal as ever and one was watched closely as it set about lining its nest hole with mud. There were Brambling with the Chaffinch, and a Raven called overhead.

Persistence paid off as a Middle Spotted Woodpecker eventually showed well high in a tree and allowed scope views - hoorays all around! Other highlights included a Bullfinch and a party of Crossbill with a female who showed well. A brief stop at the viewpoint added first a single, then a family of Wild Boar crossing a field in front of us - great!

We then drove to Belgium's eastern high plateau and once on the higher parts the snow made the whole area very picturesque! We stopped at the information centre for lunch and were duly rewarded with excellent sightings of Coal Tit and male Crossbill perched right out in the open, allowing great scope views.

After a scan from the highest point of Belgium we drove to the Wanne area. A single Red Kite low overhead caused some excitement. Once at the site we quickly found several Great Grey Shrikes perching on the top of dead trees and we got great scope views. These were quickly followed by distant views of Nutcracker that only posed for brief moments in the open (great spotting by David T!).

A short walk then took us to a few tiny patches of Beech forest where the resident Black Woodpecker decided to welcome us with a great show, first flying around us and then landing in a tree close to us.

In the scope we could clearly see its pale eye and red cap. What an impressive bird this is and a great one to end the day with.

We returned to the hotel for another delicious meal after an excellent day in the field.

## Day 4

## Sunday 1st March

Famenne – Dinant – Lille. Weather: Light rain, overcast, grey

A few were up early again with Tom and trying a different route we saw yet more Hawfinch and our first Short-toed Treecreeper of the trip in an area of Silver Birch. With the weather setting-in a little we headed back for breakfast.

After breakfast and saying farewell to our excellent hosts we drove back to the Famenne and en route found two Great White Egrets and a few Cormorants. We stopped at the quarry but did not see anything new and the Eagle Owl again proving difficult to pick out. We then took a walk along the river and were rewarded with good sightings of several Short-toed Treecreepers singing and displaying in a dead tree, and a small group of Goosander flying low overhead. We also saw lots of fresh signs of Beaver here. A noisy flock of Siskin were seen in the Alders before we continued on our way.

As it was en route Lille, we again made a brief stop for lunch at Dinant. All too soon it was time to leave this rocky town as we had to catch the mid-afternoon Eurostar train back from Lille to London.

It had been a thoroughly enjoyable few days with some fantastic birds, great company and excellent food and drink.

Thanks, bedankt, merci.....see you all again soon, somewhere....

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta Garzetta</i>
6	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
7	Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
11	Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabilis</i>
12	White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
13	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
14	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leacopsis</i>
15	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>
16	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
17	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
18	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
19	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>
20	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
21	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
22	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
23	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
24	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
25	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>
26	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
27	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
28	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
30	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
32	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>
33	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
34	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
35	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
36	Oystercatcher	<i>Haemantopus ostralegus</i>
37	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
38	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
39	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
40	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
41	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>

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42	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
43	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
44	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
45	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
46	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia feral</i>
47	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
48	Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>
49	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
50	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
51	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
52	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>
53	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
54	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
55	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
56	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
57	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
58	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
59	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
60	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
61	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
62	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
63	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
64	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
65	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
66	Firecrest	<i>Regulus inoratus</i>
67	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
68	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
69	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
70	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
71	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
72	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>
73	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
74	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>
75	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
76	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
77	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
78	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
79	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
80	Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>
81	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
82	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
83	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
84	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
85	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>

86	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
87	Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>
88	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
89	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montefrigilla</i>
90	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
91	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
92	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
93	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
94	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>

## Mammals

	Common Name	February/March			
		26	27	28	1
1	European Hare	10	5		1
2	Wood Mouse			1	
3	Wild Boar			8	
4	Roe Deer	2		1	

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