

# Norfolk in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 – 8 November 2015

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Black Brant

Report & Image compiled by Toby Collett



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)



Tour Leader: Toby Collett (Leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

## Friday 6th November

We all met for pre-dinner introductions at the Shellbrooke Hotel in Hunstanton, our base for the weekend. The conversation focussed on the group's hopes for the weekend and how the weather-dictated itinerary would try and tick those boxes. We retired with an early start on the mind as we looked to get Saturday off to a great start.

## Day 2

## Saturday 7th November

With rain forecast for mid-to-late morning, we had a dawn start to try and squeeze in some birds before breakfast and the rain. Many of the group hadn't been to Norfolk before so it was great to start at Holme and get a feel for the habitats we would be in over the weekend. A choppy sea, sandy beaches, coastal scrub and the extensive grazing marshes of the reserve were revealed to all as day, very slowly, broke. A Common Redshank broke the silence as it flew over the marsh away from us. Flocks of Eurasian Curlew then lifted off from their roost and headed over our heads and inland to forage on the fields. Several parties of Eurasian Teal were also on the move, wheeling around us as we walked along the dune path, while the 'chew-chew-chew' of a Common Greenshank carried over the pools as it landed, out of sight, in the fringes. A good vantage point was reached and we scanned the beach and shore looking for waders and wildfowl. Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone dotted the shoreline, but distance and light were against us to get decent views.

Closer to the dunes, a small pool held a lone Grey Plover, a couple of Eurasian Oystercatcher and Common Redshank. This allowed the group to work on some finer points of identification. Out to sea several Northern Gannets cruised past including a young bird that came in quite close. A glance back inland was greeted with both good news and bad as a large cloud loomed overhead and spots of rain started to fall. A scan of the marsh picked up several thousand Pink-footed Geese lifting off from Thornham Point well to the east of us, but closer in were several cream crowned Marsh Harriers which were soon joined by a couple of Barn Owls, quartering the fields and margins. As the rain got heavier we started to head back, but not before a quartet of Whooper Swans came in off the sea and flew low inland. It was a wet but bird filled start to the day.

Breakfast was devoured and with full tummies, we set off again. The Wildfowl and Wetland Trust at Welney took time to get to but as we found out, was absolutely worth it. Eyes frantically searched the approach in the hope of a European Crane, but we had to be content with a mid-range group of about 60 Whooper Swans. With the rain slowly coming down we checked in and headed over the bridge to the main observatory. The sight that greeted us was one of splendour and abundance! Several 'ooos' and 'wows' were uttered as we pored through the windows at the throng of thousands of wildfowl littered before us. We settled down to go through the ducks and work on some finer identification points, but no sooner had we raised our optics than we found we had to put them down again. A whoosh and chorus of whistles as several thousand Eurasian Wigeon took to the skies could only mean one thing – a raptor! A huge dark falcon powered low over the grassland and towards the hide, scattering birds before it. This enormous first-year Peregrine Falcon was about to put on a display of aerial agility that the Red Arrows could only dream of. For the next 15-20 minutes we could do nothing more than be amazed as it showed off in front of us, carving low over the water then rising in an arc before stooping down on the masses below. It felt more like an exhibition than a hunt and we certainly appreciated the performance.

Eventually the Peregrine Falcon had a spat with a young Western Marsh Harrier and moved off, allowing a sense of calm to fall in front of us. Eurasian Wigeon were by far the most numerous duck with Eurasian Teal an obvious, but distant, second. A small party of Tufted Duck were to the left of us and Northern Shoveler were scattered across the open water and snoozing in the fringes. A handful of Northern Pintail were a little harder to pick out, but great views were had of this elegant duck once we got our eyes in. Common Pochard and Gadwall were also found, with the latter needing a bit more care to locate. A dozen Whooper Swans were dispersed in front with several feeding on the left-over seed that is thrown out in the evenings as part of the daily feeding regime.

With the wildfowl noted and some of the finer identification points sorted out, our attention turned towards the waders. A good mixed bunch of Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit were both feeding and roosting together, allowing size and shape comparison. A single Ruff was feeding among the ducks and some distant Common Snipe became not so distant, flying straight towards us and onto the island below. After struggling to see them clearly as they hid in the long grass, we all thought views would be much easier now they were ten metres in front of us. The calls of “Where did it go?” and “Is it still there?” were testament to just how incredible these birds are; standing motionless and blending perfectly into the short island vegetation, rendering them nearly invisible.

An opening in the weather gave us a chance to change the scenery and visit the next hide. A different view greeted us as gone was the expanse of water and ducks, and before us lay a muddy field. At first glance you’d have been forgiven for thinking it was empty, but oh no. With optics in hand we were able to pick out dozens of Common Snipe, furiously probing away in the mud, with several groups of Dunlin doing the same. A nice surprise was a Green Sandpiper bobbing to our left and our Ruff sightings for the morning quadrupled. The sharp loud burst of song from the reeds in front of us gave away the presence of a Cetti’s Warbler. Joining the Green Sandpiper in the ‘wasn’t expecting that’ box was a stunning Water Pipit. With time ticking and the weather clearing, lunch and our next stop were on the mind. With wonderful views out over the fields we tucked in to some hearty fare at the Welney Cafe before adding Eurasian Tree Sparrow to the list at the feeders as we rejoined the minibus.

RSPB Titchwell is a ‘must’ visit for anyone birding the Norfolk coast and, like Welney, it didn’t disappoint. After a quick chat with Simon on the front desk to see what was about, we went outside and immediately spotted a gorgeous Brambling on the feeders. Rough-legged Buzzard and Jack Snipe had been seen on the way to the beach but the former had drifted south and the latter disappeared into cover before we had time to look for them. Undeterred we continued, enjoying the variety and number of birds out on the fresh marsh and close to the path. As at Welney, wigeon and teal dominated in numbers, carpeting the islands as they grazed. Northern Lapwing and European Golden Plover were the most numerous waders, and keen eyes in the group picked out a dozen Pied Avocets tucked in together behind an island. With the tide coming in we made our way to the beach, enjoying a very confiding Common Greenshank and brushing-up on our wader identification from earlier as we passed several Common Redshanks and Black-tailed Godwits. The sea wasn’t as still as we hoped and getting good views of the female Long-tailed Duck and parties of Red-breasted Merganser wasn’t easy. We enjoyed a fly-by from two young Common Goldeneye. A species we didn’t have to spend too long looking for was Black-headed Gull when one waddled up to within three metres of us. Unfortunately for his appetite we hadn’t brought any chips with us, though his cholesterol levels were all the better for it. A final scan along the shore revealed Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone and Grey Plover all running along the strand line.

We left the beach and moved to the comfort of Parrinder Hide, hoping to enjoy the sight of Pink-footed Geese returning to the roost we saw them leave this morning. As the light dwindled we were treated to an ever increasing number of gulls and waders coming in for a wash and drink. The majority were Black-headed Gulls, but European Herring Gulls and Lesser and Greater Black-backed Gulls swelled the ranks. A lone Yellow-legged Gull was the best we could find in among them. Five Western Marsh Harriers and a Common Buzzard made up the raptor roost and a tree on the edge of the reserve held 30 Little Egrets. Unfortunately the Pink-footed Geese didn't return to Thornham but as dusk fell, the chorus of whistles and calls of thousands of birds roosting on the reserve confirmed just what a special place this is.

## Day 3

## Sunday 8th November

The blustery conditions were still with us on Sunday morning, but a hearty breakfast meant that at least our tummies would be settled. We headed to Cley for the morning to try and spot Bearded Reedling (Tit) and see what else we could turn up at the original Wildlife Trust reserve. We met Norfolk leader Simon and made straight for the reedbed. The wind meant that the odds were against us hearing, let alone seeing, Bearded Reedling and this proved to be the case for the day. A couple of European Stonechats on the way to the hide and on the return eased the blank space on our trip list a little. The scrapes didn't hold anything different to what we had seen at Titchwell, but we enjoyed the good views of wildfowl and waders, with a few nice Western Marsh Harriers flying by.

An exchange of messages alerted us to the location of the American race of Brant (Brent) Goose. A Black Brant was just around the corner so we quickly returned to the vehicle and were scanning through 130 Brent Geese in minutes. The dark tones and large white flank patch were subtle enough to make it hard to find in the flock, but once the eyes were trained we enjoyed watching the Black Brant as it fed 30 metres from us. Happy that we'd seen something more unusual, we headed towards the beach to see if we could find another new addition for the day. That turned out to be a little optimistic due to the choppy sea, but a smart group of European Golden Plover in the fields next to the shingle gave some very close views.

The combination of wind and walking was having an effect and leaving us all a little peckish. We drove inland a little to Natural Surroundings, a wonderful little cafe tucked away from the main road in the grounds of the Bayfield Estate. Once the orders were in, we sat down in front of the windows and it was soon apparent that it was just a cafe for us. The feeders were alive with birds. Coal Tits were the most numerous, whizzing backwards and forwards, but treats were in store with several Marsh Tits popping up as well as Great Spotted Woodpecker and Eurasian Nuthatch. With all the activity outside the window and good food inside we found it hard to leave, but we did so just at the right moment. We were told about a flock of Eurasian Siskin in the Alders outside and while watching them, a Common Firecrest showed briefly just above our heads! This was the first record for the cafe and a great way to repay the staff for a very tasty lunch.

A brief trip back to Cley for a final Bearded Reedling hunt yielded our only Water Rail of the trip as it squealed away from cover. A quick look at the bird news services revealed a few owls and harriers had been seen at Holkham the evening before, so we thought this would be a good place to finish the day off. A quick stop on the way to admire a field full of Pink-footed Geese was the only time we saw them in such numbers on the ground.

We arrived at Holkham with a couple of hours of daylight left. A quick scan of the fields revealed pockets of Pink-footed Geese mixed in with the Greylag Geese, a few distant Western Marsh Harriers quartering the rough ground, and a Barn Owl drifted over the grassland but never came close. The group wanted to see Goldcrest so we headed into the pines with the hope of seeing some. The views over the beach were fantastic and much better than any we had of the Goldcrests which chose to remain high in the canopy. The desired Short-eared Owls and Hen Harriers didn't put in an appearance (instead going to Titchwell where we were the evening before!) but we enjoyed up to six Western Marsh Harriers and a couple of Common Buzzards as dusk fell.

A quick total in the minibus showed we had recorded nearly 100 bird species over the weekend. It had been a great couple of days with great company and hopefully everyone enjoyed it as much as Toby!

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## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; c = approximate count; h = heard only)

	<b>Common name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>	<b>November</b>	
			<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
1	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	c8,000	c4,000
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	120	80
3	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	3	50
4	Brant Goose (Brent Goose)	<i>Branta bernicla bernicla</i>	62	130
	Brant Goose (Black Brant)	<i>Branta bernicla nigricans</i>		1
5	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	4	2
6	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	64	
7	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	22	8
8	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	39	18
9	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	c7,000	C200
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	320	32
11	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	40	27
12	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	12	10
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	c5,500	300
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	24	
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	23	4
16	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	1	
17	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	2	
18	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	8	
19	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	6	
20	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	6	2
21	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	5	2
22	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	2
23	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	34	2
24	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	4	c20
25	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	38	
26	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	12	11
27	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	3
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		h
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	5	
30	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	6	
31	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	31	
32	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	10	12
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	c200	90
34	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	c170	c200
35	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	20	
36	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	2	6
37	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	36	4
38	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	130	
39	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	22	
40	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	140	
41	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	70	
42	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	2	
43	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1	
44	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	6	
45	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	1	
46	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	20	
47	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	56	
48	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	34	

	<b>Common name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>	<b>November</b>	
			<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
49	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	205	
50	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	4	
51	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	10	
52	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	60	
53	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	1	
54	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	40	
55	Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i> 'feral'	✓	✓
56	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	150	
57	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	8	
58	Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	2	1
59	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1
60	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		1
61	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		3
62	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	
63	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		2
64	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	
65	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	
66	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	
67	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	
68	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		10
69	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		4
70	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	2	✓
71	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	2	✓
72	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	7	
73	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1+1h	
74	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		6
75	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1
76	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		h
77	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
78	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1
79	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	200	
80	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	4	
81	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	1	
82	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	1	
83	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
84	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		4
85	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	20	
86	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	2	
87	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
88	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	8	
89	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	12	
90	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	1	
91	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	18	
92	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	1	
93	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	8	
94	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	18	40
95	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		6
96	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	6	
97	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		20
98	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	3	2