

# Norfolk in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 – 11 November 2018

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Report compiled by Toby Collett



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Tour Participants - Toby Collett (Leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Friday 9th November

A mild and clear evening greeted us on arrival at the Shellbrooke Hotel in Hunstanton. For many this was their first visit to Norfolk and for others a reintroduction. Tides and times meant that their socks would be knocked off with birding awesomeness the next morning, so a wee chat was had to make sure that the rest of the weekend would continue to meet expectations. As with previous groups, everyone was really looking forward to getting out, stretching their legs and seeing a few new things while discovering this wonderful part of the country. With the weather checked, itinerary confirmed and alarms set, we were called through for our evening meal. Nine empty plates later bed was calling so we retired and looked forward to dawn.

## Day 2

Saturday 10th November

All wrapped up, we met downstairs just after 6am and were in our minibus 10 minutes later. Our destination was RSPB Snettisham and a date with 15,000 Pink-footed Geese and 35,000 Knot alongside a supporting cast of over 10,000 mixed waders. As we approached the shingle ridge in the half light, some geese were already on the move. The 'wink-wink' call, distinctive and lonely on the wind, helped us to locate several small groups heading inland. As the visibility improved, we got a feel for the scale of both the mudflats and the sheer abundance of birds out there. For those who had seen this before, it was pretty special. For those who hadn't, it was incredible. As the geese started to wake, the activity and volume increased. Parties of ten turned into 50, 50 to a hundred, hundreds then became thousands as half the flock lifted and flew over our heads, filling the sky. Below them, the Knot flock was getting pushed into an ever denser bunch, occasionally rippling upwards in small groups as the tide encroached. Flanking the Knot were a couple of thousand each of Bar-tailed Godwit and Oystercatcher, while Dunlin hurriedly fed among them. Half way down to the hide and the rest of the Pink-footed Geese rose with a flurry. Despite having seen the same thing only 15 minutes previously, jaws still dropped at the sight.

As we settled in at the viewpoint to sift through the waders, a scan back the way we came picked out a Merlin on a gate we had passed. Unfortunately it was off before we got the scope on it. Luckily we saw where it was going and as we tried to anticipate where it might reappear, it suddenly shot low over the bank and whooshed past us along the ridge. Often a species which you see at quite a distance, to have one bullet past at 20 metres was quite a treat! While following it along we picked out a female Marsh Harrier over the saltmarsh. She pushed about 800 Curlew from cover but didn't stray far enough to move the Knot. The tide was now at it's peak, the wind holding it back and keeping the birds out on the mud. Shelduck, Wigeon and Teal sat close in the water while a couple of Little Egrets chased on the waters edge. We bumped into Guy Anderson from the RSPB who was out colour ring finding for the Wash Wader Ringing Group. He had already identified 20 different individuals and kindly gave an impromptu talk to the group about the importance of the work the WWRG did and some of their findings.

Conscious of time, we were slightly worried that by staying to see the famous Knot swirls it would have a knock-on effect for the rest of the day. Toby gathered the group together and apologised for the Knot not performing and motioned that we needed to head back. That was obviously the cue for the Knot to perform as wow wow WOW did they perform. Seeing a swarm of birds is one thing, hearing them quite another. The roar of wings is like an engine starting, but instead of 400 horse power, it's 35,000 Knot power. The light that morning had been

perfect, illuminating the mud flats over our shoulders and it was now turning the Knot into white and grey flashes as it lit their tummies while they wheeled and banked in front of us. Ooohs and Aaaahs could not be held back as we stared in awe and fascination at the display. After ten minutes they spread out and settled offering us the perfect exit strategy and plenty to talk about over breakfast.

Toast munched and coffee drunk, we were on our way to WWT Welney in the heart of the Fens. Alongside both RSPB Nene and Ouse Washes, Welney is a wonderful wetland from a bygone time - a small window into how wild and abundant the Fens would have been over half a century ago prior to draining attempts in the 1600's and then the Dutch drainage regimes of the early 19th century.

The visitor centre rises tall in the landscape with great views across the peat rich farmland of the fens. A scan for Cranes came up blank (although four were seen from the same spot the following day) so we headed over the bridge to what must be one of the best hides in the country. A sea of wildfowl greeted us, carpeting the grassland in front of us. Several thousand Wigeon and Teal dominated the numbers but it was the several hundred Whooper Swans that offered the physical bulk. These were spread over the fields beyond the hide as well as in the pool below us. It was nice to see 400 Black-tailed Godwit in close which allowed us to go over the differences between them and the Bar-tailed Godwits we saw earlier that morning at Snettisham.

While enjoying the wildfowl, we also set about scanning for raptors. A bulky female Peregrine sat motionless on a bund, several Kestrels hovered and a quartet of quartering harriers were off to our right. After good scope views, and knowing we weren't missing out on anything, we set about enjoying the ducks, picking out some Shoveler and single Pintail. After the thousands of Pink-footed Geese we saw that morning, four on the water's edge weren't too significant for the day's tally but were a good Welney record.

A change of scene saw us move down to the Lyle Hide, where the star bird was a mid-range Great Egret. We enjoyed some better views of the Marsh Harriers, and also added Buzzard to the list, both putting up hundreds of Teal and Wigeon as they moved through the reserve.

Alas the schedule waits for no group and we had to head back for lunch to make sure we got to Titchwell in time. Due to Mark's wonderful portions at the Shellbrooke it was light bites only and soon we were off.

A misjudged detour to look for fields of geese only resulted in an accidental emergency stop (unfamiliar automatic) for a very nicely posed Red Kite. We arrived at Titchwell underneath skeins of geese and headed to the Visitor Centre to see what was about. While there were some nice bits on the beach, the light was running out and so we opted to stay on the west bank and scan the fresh marsh and saltmarsh. The former was far more productive with the latter being absent of our target Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl quarry. As at Welney, the majority of duck on show were Wigeon and Teal. We were able to scan through them and pick out a few Avocet, Dunlin, Redshank and Ruff. Gull numbers were increasing as the minutes ticked by but nothing unusual was in among them. An incredible weather front was rolling in behind us while we enjoyed over 25 Marsh Harriers coming into roost, a quite incredible sight and the most any of the group had seen before. Little Egrets trickled past 50 as they dotted the dead trees behind the reedbed. As the rain started to fall we just managed to hear a few brief snatches of Bearded Tit before getting back to the car and closing the doors on a deluge. An hour or so later we were all dry and settled at supper after a long day in the field. A deserved lie in awaited as we only had to

be up at 06:40 next morning. While Saturday had given us the quantity, Sunday would hopefully provide the quality to finish the weekend in style.

## Day 3

## Sunday 11th November

Before breakfast today we had a short drive rather than the more usual walk from the hotel. Holme is all the bits that make the North Norfolk coast special in one place and has the birds to go with it. The morning started well as we picked up a Barn Owl flying in the horse paddocks. Hoping this would be a good sign, it turned out to be the only one we had all weekend. Up on the main path we headed out along the dunes. Redshank and Curlew flighted from the saltmarsh pools behind us as we scanned the grazing marshes for owls and harriers. Several Marsh Harriers quartered along the field margins while a lone Buzzard kept watch from the top of the hedge. As we moved further along the dune boardwalk we could see that the high tide had pushed in some waders. While not quite in the same numbers as we'd seen at Snettisham the previous morning, we did see some Sanderling and Grey Plover which we hadn't seen yesterday. A low flying Merlin preceded a squadron of Gannets cruising along the shore line towards us as a few Brent Geese went the other way. Elizabeth found a pair of Stonechat on the gorse, associating with a dapper male Reed Bunting. Skylarks and Meadow Pipit moved overhead and while looking up we noticed the clouds looming. A final scan and we would be off, although of course if something interesting was to be found then that would just be unlucky but at least everyone would see it..... Alas, luck wasn't with us. A shape at the bottom of the hedge looked to be a bird of prey and from general size and behaviour, it was. The weather wasn't great and it was miles away, and due to where it was in a gap in the hedge, Toby was unfortunately the only one who could see it... After lots of umming and ahing, and to cut a long story short, it was probably a Rough-legged Buzzard (there had been one around). As rubbish as this was, the delay to check it out meant a few of us got very soggy indeed.

After breakfast we were heading right to the other side of the North Norfolk coast. We usually don't head this way but as it's only 15 minutes from Cley it made sense to start here as there was a nice sea duck waiting for us. Due to being so birdy and tour focussed, the precise timings and significance of the day, on the day, had escaped me and we came to a standstill as the Remembrance Day procession passed by. Some quick google mapping from Tom meant we were lucky enough to get parked up to enjoy a distant King Eider and also be close enough to the war memorial to pay our respects. A few Guillemots and Red-throated Diver were also on the sea but we were a day too early for a Pallid Swift. Halfway between Sheringham and Cley were 6 Waxwings in a car park so that was our next port of call. Another remembrance service had taken place just beneath where they are usually seen so it was straight out to Cley.

We parked in the small car park and headed along the East Bank to the little look out. A fresh breeze and 20 minutes of rain put paid to efforts to listen out for Bearded Tit but it was great to see the marshes wetting up and to be so close to the wildfowl. The screen offered nothing new for the weekend but allowed us to go over some good wader ID with Dunlin, Redshank, Curlew, Grey Plover and Black-tailed Godwit all together. A bit of heat was needed so it was off to the Visitor Centre for lunch and drinks. We timed our arrival perfectly as we beat the queue and also enjoyed a Spoonbill arriving onto the scrapes. Wanting to have better views of the Spoonbill we polished off various cakes and scones and headed out. Just as we got to the road, a gingery female Marsh Harrier put up everything on the scrape including the Spoonbill. Fortunately it flew quite close so we all enjoyed that distinctive bill and flight shape. By the time we got to the hides, most things had settled back down. Hundreds of Black-tailed Godwits, Teal and Wigeon were present in big numbers but there were also Shelduck,

Shoveller and Gadwall dabbling away on the scrapes, with a few Dunlin on the mud. A big flock of Brent Geese rose from behind the reeds, giving us much better sight and sound than the pair we saw before breakfast. Marsh Harriers continued to roam and 'Pinks' were on the move as we gathered ourselves and headed to our final site.

Holkham is well known, and wins many awards for its incredible beach, but the birdlife here is also notable. The new visitor hub gave us a chance for stop for a hot drink, along with another fruitless scan for Hen Harriers and Owls. We did pick out two Muntjac Deer undisturbed on the grassland while more Pink-footed Geese arrived from the higher fields as the roost started to build. A lone Buzzard feeding on the ground was fun to watch but as the minutes ticked by our chances to add to the days tally lessened. Some great work by the wardening team meant a cordon had been set up in several areas to allow some of the more special and unusual coastal birds to feed undisturbed. A large group of Snow Bunting and half a dozen Shore Larks had been found but the chances of seeing both were dashed when a returning group said that they had seen the buntings but not the larks. Surprisingly when we got to the cordon, the three birders there said they had the Shore Larks but not the buntings. We set off to try to locate the larger flock and despite a hunt round the perimeter, they were not to be seen. Just as we started to head off into the sunset, the larks got up and moved further into cover. It was bed time for them and also time to finish for us.

Back at the Shelbrooke we disembarked from the van for the last time. What a great weekend and while we didn't reel in a big species count, what we did see was very memorable indeed. Thank you to the group for being so patient and friendly. It was a pleasure to show you all round this wonderful part of the country and we hope we've done enough to entice you back soon.

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## Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	November	
			10	11
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		1
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		8
3	Great-crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		4
4	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		16+
5	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	51	42+
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	56+	3
7	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	1
9	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		1
10	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	40	2
11	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	220+	
12	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	18,004+	4,100+
13	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	400	40
14	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
15	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		182
16	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>	5	7
17	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	43	10
18	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	2,230+	460
19	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		14
20	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	206	240
21	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	160+	30
22	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	6	1
23	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	120	30
24	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	20	
25	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	16	
26	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>		1
27	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	32+	16
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	3	1
29	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>		1?
30	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	5+	1
31	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	1
32	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	
33	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
34	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	6	
35	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	11	
36	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	2,000+	
37	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	5	
38	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	601	
39	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		30
40	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	1075	40
41	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	300	30
42	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	2,000+	30
43	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	620	80
44	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	22	6
45	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	8	4
46	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	40,000+	3
47	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		8

	Common name	Scientific name	November	
			10	11
48	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	270	
49	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	32+	
50	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	32	
51	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	48	9
52	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	186	14
53	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	12	
54	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	600+	
55	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓
56	Rock/Feral Dove	<i>Columba l. 'feral'</i>	✓	✓
57	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	20	
58	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	3	
60	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1
61	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		h
62	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	20	8
63	Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>		6
64	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	10	14
65	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	1	
66	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>	6	
67	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	2
68	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		2
69	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2	3
70	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		2
71	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	4	4
72	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	52	
73	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	H
74	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H
75	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		H
76	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
77	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
78	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
79	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
80	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	250	60
81	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	1	
82	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	10	
83	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		3
84	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	8	
85	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	9	
86	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	1	

## Mammals

Grey Squirrel, *Sciurus carolinensis*

European Hare, *Lepus europaeus*

Roe Deer, *Capreolus Capreolus*

Bat sp

Rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Muntjac, *Muntiacus reevesi*

Grey Seal, *Halichoerus grypus*