

Norfolk in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 17 November 2019



Pink-footed Geese



North Norfolk marshes



Short-eared Owls



Snow Bunting

Report compiled by Toby Collett

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Tour participants: Toby Collett (leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Friday 15th November

A new hotel for this tour saw us relocate to the LeStrange Arms, in Old Hunstanton. Another ideal spot on the cliff top looking out over the sea (not that we could see the sea when we arrived in the dark), and well placed for us to explore the North Norfolk coast and beyond. As we tucked into a pretty hearty supper, we all got to know each other and talk about our hopes for the weekend. With the weather checked, the burning question of the night was raised..... 'What time are we up tomorrow?' Our plans were to head to Snettisham for dawn to see the Pink-footed Geese and Knot gathering on the mudflats. A leisurely 06:40 alarm was set and we retired for the night

Day 2

Saturday 16th November

The later tide had allowed us a little lie in from previous years but we were still up in the dark. Luckily beaming grins on eager faces lit the hallway and we headed to the van. The tide wasn't going to be BIG big, so while we weren't going to get the close swirls of birds, we would still get the spectacle. And we weren't disappointed! We were welcomed out of the van by thousands and thousands of Pink-footed Geese yapping and 'wink-wink' ing on the mudflats. It was hard to get a handle on the numbers as it was still on the gloomy side, but as it got lighter it became apparent there were tens of thousands out there.

As the tide rose, small flocks of waders were being pushed off feeding areas and onto higher ground, squeezing together as they gathered to roost. From the huge number of Knot, we were able to filter out Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Sanderling, Grey Plover and Turnstone. Closer in, the larger Curlew were more obvious, feeding among scattered groups of Shelduck and the occasional Oystercatcher. Scanning over the saltmarsh we picked up Peregrine, Buzzard and Marsh Harriers on fenceposts with a few of the latter quartering further out. A large flock of mixed age gulls didn't yield the hoped for Caspian Gull but went one better and attracted in a gorgeous dark phase Arctic Skua. Our eyes had had their fill and now it was time to fill our tummies. Linnets and Goldfinch flicked though the buckthorn on the way back while a Kestrel was being heckled on the far side of the pits by Blackbirds and Fieldfares.

Over breakfast we were all giddy after our early morning visit and how exceptional and unique Snettisham is. We had been spoiled with both quantity and quality and we were about to be spoiled further. The Fens were our next port of call with RSPB Nene Washes and WWT Welney our destinations for the afternoon. There had been well above average rainfall over the previous week so several roads were closed and birds well spread out. An unsuccessful search for a mobile Crane flock did give us good views of a Barn Owl and a few Whooper Swan flocks. The big silver lining to our fruitless Crane hunt was a point blank ring-tailed Hen Harrier as soon as we arrived in the Eldernell car park at the RSPB Nene Washes. It quartered in front of us for 20 minutes giving several of the group their best ever views of this enigmatic species. After a start like that it was surely only downhill from there, but less than 10 minutes later we were watching six Short-eared Owls roosting together in an elder. A seventh bird was tucked away in the hedgerow and was a little closer, holding the attention of a handful of photographers. We headed off along the sea bank scanning the vast wetlands as we went. A darting Muntjac paused on a path long enough for us all to get a good view. Birds of prey were again in abundance. Buzzards, Kestrels and Marsh Harriers comfortably reached double figures. The floods themselves held wildfowl in their thousands with Wigeon making up the bulk, alongside Shoveler, Mallard, Teal, Gadwall and Pintail. Masses of Lapwing and Golden Plover erupted

as a Peregrine cruised across and the water boiled with ducks. A special sight indeed. The small wood held a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers (while a Green Woodpecker 'yaffled' behind us) and a Stonechat was seen on its fringe.

Lunch time beckoned so we headed back to the van and set off for Welney, the drive an extra 20 minutes due to flooding. Fortunately we'd had a great day so far so plenty to talk about to fill the time. On arrival at Welney, Toby scanned Lady Fen as the group ordered lunch. Four Great White Egrets were patrolling the shallows while six Roe Deer loafed nearby. A Hare walk was taking place and the group flushed several that we managed to see from the height of the café balcony. Whooper Swans were feeding well off the distance but much closer were a horde of Tree Sparrows on the feeders.

With much of the reserve off limits due to flooded paths, we would spend the next few hours in the main hide overlooking the grassland, or that's what it usually looks over. Upon entry it was clear we wouldn't be seeing any wading birds as the grassland was now a lake! Water stretched as far as the eye could see. Unfortunately for us this meant that most of the flood plain was available to the swans and we didn't get the high densities usually associated with the reserve. What we did get though was the commentary on a swan feed and we watched Pochard, Tufted Duck and Mallard squabble among 50 or so Whooper and Mute Swans as one of the staff, who would normally wear wellies, was dishing out grain in chest waders. As the sun dropped, a thousand Starlings treated us to a mini-murmuration. As attractive as it was for us, it also caught the attention of a Sparrowhawk who had a few unsuccessful attempts at supper. Our final bird of the day was a Barn Owl, well two, that hunted along the drain edges. A busy, busy day full of many memorable moments, which we all enjoyed remembering over log that evening. Could day three offer some of the same?

Day 3

Sunday 17th November

Usually we'd be up and out once before light, but the LeStrange is up and running pretty early so after a long day yesterday we hit breakfast when doors opened at 7am. Cooked breakfast and a few Danish pastries later, well for Toby at least, we were heading to Cley NWT. The weather was on our side as we parked up and headed to the beach along the East Bank. No wind allowed us to listen out for the 'pinging' of Bearded Tits which were much easier to hear than see, though we did get a few glimpses of them skimming across the reed tops. The grassland gave us good views of Meadow Pipit and Skylark as well as Teal, Wigeon, Gadwall and Mallard. As we neared the main ditch we were told an Otter had been swimming up and down close to the bridge. Needless to say we missed it, but we did hear a Water Rail. The pools held Redshank, Grey, Golden and Ringed Plovers, Dunlin and several more duck species.

Toby knew there were some Snow Buntings around, so prepped the group to scour the shingle in front so as to see them before we spooked them. As we set off cautiously, the last thing we were expecting was a single Snow Bunting flying pretty much between group members and land a few metres away at our feet! What a looker it was too. Plenty of photos later and we were scanning the sea. A silver grey Red-throated Diver was fishing the breakers close in with Great Crested Grebe, Guillemot and Gannet off shore.

Our target bird was still present and showing well a hundred metres south, so we headed off to join a double figure crowd. The bird in question was an Isabelline Wheatear, a bird we've been lucky enough to see on this

winter tour three years previously, but the first to have been found at Cley. It showed nicely chasing around on the shingle and flycatching from fence posts, but as the crowd built we headed back, our pace hastened by reports that the Otter was back again, and we missed it, again.

A late morning coffee and cake was taken from the cafe overlooking the reserve and then it was back out to check the scrapes. Water levels were spot on and there was a good assortment of birds from the hides. Four Water Pipits flew up on arrival and unfortunately landed too far away to see them well. A 20 strong group of Ruff gave us chance to compare and contrast with a handful of Redshank while a mixed group of Sanderling and Dunlin gave us the same opportunity on the adjacent scrape. A scan of the 300 Dark-bellied Brent Goose didn't produce the hoped for Black Brant, but did help us bump our Stonechat tally up to five as we picked a few up on the fences. Marsh Harriers quartered close by and spooked everything up so we took this as our cue to move on.

Holkham was our next stop for lunch but a quick detour saw us in a layby at Wells-next-the-sea looking for a Rough-legged Buzzard. Ten minutes later and no luck, so we all piled back on the van, only to be hailed off when it flew into a tree. It filled the scope nicely and we were able to go through the key features to separate it from its more familiar cousin. We parked at Lady Anne's Drive, scanning the fields for Egyptian and Pink-footed Geese. A small covey of Grey Partridge next to the ticket office were a nice surprise as we headed up to the café. Recent works on the grassland to put in habitat features brought the birds right in with good views of a variety of geese and duck as we ate.

After lunch, we headed out to the beach to look for our next target bird, Shore Lark. A cordoned off area has been set up to prevent disturbance and allow these scarce winter visitors a safe area to feed in. Occasionally though they do fly off and can be hard to relocate. We arrived at just that that time. Fortunately they had only moved towards the far end of the cordon so we all got some pretty good views. With the light against us we didn't have time to look for sea duck, divers and grebes on the sea as RSPB Titchwell was calling. The fresh marsh was heaving and getting fuller as the light fell and the birds moved in to roost. Lapwing and Golden Plover dominated the wader spectacle but Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and Ruff were to be found among them. We were a little early in the year to truly get the best out of the Marsh Harrier roost, but we still had over 15 in the air at one time, more than a few of the group had seen in all their years of birding

What a brilliant end to a cracking weekend. It was a nervous one as we were staying somewhere new but the group were excellent and the accommodation was ideal. Can't wait to get back in the Spring!

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Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	November	
			16 th	17 th
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		4
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		5
3	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		6
4	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		2
5	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	11	20
7	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	4	
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	13	1
9	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	50+	8
10	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	400+	
11	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	15,000+	600+
12	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	200+	300+
13	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
14	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	18	300
15	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>		16
16	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	100+	26
17	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	5,000	200
18	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	80	25
19	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	2,800	140
20	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	170	48
21	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	20	7
22	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	240	36
23	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	300	5
24	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	200	14
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	14	22+
26	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1	
27	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	3
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	11	5
29	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>		1
30	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2	
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	4	2

	Common name	Scientific name	November	
			16 th	17 th
32	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	6	2
33	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>		14
34	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
35	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		1
36	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
37	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	4,000	3
39	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	6	80
40	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	100+	1,000+
41	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	30+	4
42	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	30	2
43	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	6,200+	40
44	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		3
45	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa laponica</i>	1800+	
46	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		25
47	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	120+	15
48	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	50	19
49	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	10	4
50	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	30,000+	
51	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	100+	3
52	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	11	30
53	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	5	30
54	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1	
55	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	12	2
56	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	40	8
57	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	70	19
58	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	20	1
59	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	300	50
60	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	4	
61	Rock/Feral Dove	<i>Columba l. 'feral'</i>	✓	✓
62	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	2	3
63	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
64	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2
65	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	November	
			16 th	17 th
66	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	7	
67	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>	2	
68	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	h	
69	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	7	4
70	Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>		6
71	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	20+	10+
72	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		4
73	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓
74	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
75	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
76	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
77	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	2	5
78	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>		1
79	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	10	4
80	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	1	
81	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h
82	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		h
83	Bearded Tit	<i>Panarus biarmicus</i>		h
84	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	h	H
85	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
86	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
87	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1	3
88	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
89	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
90	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
91	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
92	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	1500	50
93	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	20	8
94	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	30	
95	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓
96	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓
97	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		h
98	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓

Grey Squirrel - *Sciurus carolinensis*

Rabbit - *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Hare - *Lepus europaeus*

Muntjac - *Muntiacus reevesi*

	Common name	Scientific name	November	
			16 th	17 th
99	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	12	
100	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓
101	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		1

Mammals

Roe Deer – *Capreolus capreolus*