

Norfolk in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 13th February 2022



Iceland Gull at Cley beach



Fulmar checking us out at Hunstanton



Grey Partridge at Holkham NNR



Little Grebe at Holkham NNR

Report & photos by Mike Crewe



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Mike & Megan Crewe (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

Summary

There was certainly a wintery nip in the air during this trip and the seemingly now 'normal' winds showed up to taunt us, but none of this deterred from our enjoyment of two splendid days in the field on the North Norfolk Coast. After a bracing walk to visit the local Fulmar colony, we spent our first morning on the shingle beach at Cley, where a party of Snow Buntings and a first-winter Iceland Gull entertained. On the famous Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Cley, we found smart Pintails upending and flocks of waders and ducks out on the grazing marsh, giving us a chance to study the feeding habits of manic Ruff and far more sedate Black-tailed Godwits. In the afternoon, we enjoyed the delights of Titchwell RSPB Reserve, from Bramblings on the feeders to Knot, Turnstone and Bar-tailed Godwits on the beach, via a great plethora of other waterbirds.

Sunday saw us spending the day at Holkham, where the juxtaposition of the pine-clad dunes and a convenient hide all provided good shelter from the winds and plenty of wildlife viewing. Snow Buntings tagged along the dune line and – after a fair old search – we eventually connected with a party of four Shore Larks. The grazing marshes were cram-packed with birds and testament to the continuing conservation work at the site; Grey Partridges provided frame-filling views, Marsh Harriers, Buzzards and Red Kites seemed always to be out there on view and the first of the local Spoonbills had returned from their winter wanderings. Birds were in abundance, and we had a fabulous day sharing our sightings with each other.

Day 1

Friday 11th February

Our first day gives us a chance for an evening meet up at our hotel and to get to know each other over dinner, but it was clear that some had enjoyed some birdwatching of their own on the way to the hotel and already had some good sightings to talk about this evening.

Day 2

Saturday 12th February

With a weather forecast that was far from ideal today, some of us nevertheless took on the challenge with great gusto and began, in chilly and rather draughty conditions, with a short walk along the beach from the hotel before breakfast. The tide was out, so beach birds were all rather distant, but a steady flight of large numbers of Common Gulls was taking place as they left their night-time roosts and headed off to feed. However, our main target this morning was the small colony of Fulmars that breed on the nearby cliffs and we soon had them in the scopes for all to enjoy. The impressive outcrop of cliffs consists of Carstone at the base (deposited in the early Cretaceous around 108 million years ago), through pink, Hunstanton chalk (deposited c.101mya) to the white, Ferriby Chalk at the top (deposited in the late Cretaceous c.98mya).

After a hearty breakfast, we all headed out for the day, wrapped up and prepared for the worst. Although, windy, the weather turned out reasonable in the end and it did at least stay dry. We started at nearby Holme-next-the-sea, with an all-around scan from a good vantage point right next to the car park. The strip of saltmarsh before the beach provided good views of Wigeon, Shoveler, Redshank, Little Egrets and fly-by Curlews and a distant Stonechat was picked out. In the opposite direction, at least half a dozen Marsh Harriers were patrolling the marsh and parties of Greylag Geese busied themselves. We caught sight of an impressive movement of Pink-

footed Geese as they headed out from roost to feed on the harvested sugar beet fields and, closer to us, Red-legged Partridge, Grey Heron, Golden Plover, Lapwing and Chinese Water Deer were all appreciated.

We continued east along the coast until we reached Cley-next-the sea and drove down to check the sea at the beach car park. Though the water was quiet for birds, we did pick out a Red-throated Diver and a good variety of gulls was present – including the Iceland Gull that we had hoped we might see, but it was rather too distant for now. We took a stroll part way along the beach and chanced across a few Snow Buntings before we decided it was time for a closer look at the Iceland Gull. The walk along the East Bank provided plenty of opportunity to enjoy close encounters with teal and Wigeon, a party of Ruff feeding with the Starlings and Lapwings and some smart, up-ending Pintails. On the beach, the Iceland Gull showed outrageously well, first flying past, then settling on the shingle close by. It had been a very full morning and it was now time for lunch and a proper warm up.

After a thorough re-refresh at Cley, we headed back west and spent the afternoon at Titchwell RSPB Reserve. First stop – as ever – were the feeders and almost immediately we had five Bramblings showing themselves perfectly in the Alders, along with a nice range of other finches, tits and the like. The local Water Rail was not so obliging this week and decided not to show, so we made our way straight to the beach, only stopping on the way to look at everything on the reserve – well you have to, really! At the beach, the tide was quite well in, so the waders were not too far out, though we favoured remaining tucked in behind the low dunes rather than heading too far out onto the beach. Oystercatchers, Turnstones and Bar-tailed Godwits were soon apparent and careful scanning also turned up Knot, Grey Plover and more. We headed back as far as one of the hides and took a break from the wind as the sun started to set. This time of day is always dramatic along the North Norfolk Coast in winter, and we were soon watching a mini Starling murmuration, Marsh Harriers dancing in the air, parties of Pied Wagtails resting on the mud and a fabulous twinkling of Golden Plover. As we left, a barking squadron of Brent Geese arrived and a Cetti's Warbler announced its presence, making for an excellent way to round of the day.

Day 3

Sunday 13th February

We'd managed admirably in yesterday's forecast winds, but how would we fair with the added threat of rain? Well, admirably is the answer, as it turns out! Sorting out all of the hotel necessities before departing today, we were soon on our way, and we headed east to the Holkham Estate. An extended scan of the grazing marshes before we set out was in order and this quickly produced some memorable moments, with great sheets of Lapwings, Starlings, Wigeon and Teal filling the air as a Peregrine came looking for breakfast. With Common Buzzards, Marsh Harriers and Red Kites also in the air, it was a spectacular start to the day! A flock of 50 or more Black-tailed Godwits winged in to feed and Curlew were scattered across the grass. Always much hoped-for on Norfolk trips is Grey Partridge and we were not to be disappointed as a pair fed quietly quite close to the car park.

Walking out towards the beach, the pines on the dunes soon provided us with protection from the wind and it turned out to be a reasonable morning, weather-wise. In the pines, a small feeding flock provided us with Coal Tits, Goldcrests and a Treecreeper before we headed out along the back of the beach to see what we could find. A party of seven or so Snow Buntings was feeding busily in the dunes and gave several nice flights, but the Shore Larks seemed to have gone out for the day as a lengthy scan of their favoured section of beach drew a blank. But all was not lost, as we headed to a different part of the beach and, after enjoying a manic little group of

Sanderling, we suddenly noticed four Shore Larks feeding quietly in the background. Perfect timing as lunchtime was fast approaching, so we headed back to the café to get warmed up and refreshed.

Light rain started to fall (though there were different levels of tolerance as to what qualified as light rain!), but we thought we'd take a chance and bank on the trees giving us a certain amount of cover. In the event, this proved to be a good move, as the rain didn't come to much and we made our way back out along the dunes. The brackish pool provided us with several smart Gadwall, a grubby male Pintail, two Little Grebes and a Grey Wagtail, then we pressed on to one of the hides, from where we would be able to scan the marsh in relative comfort. A very busy scene revealed itself, with a mass of waterfowl, waders and raptors spread out before us. Among our finds were three Great Egrets, another strafing run from a Peregrine, a party of White-fronted Geese with the local Greylags and, perhaps best of all, three Spoonbills, that gave excellent views, and will no doubt be local birds that will stop and breed again this year. Holkham had provided some real highlights today, the weather had been nowhere near as bad as we might have been led to believe and we had certainly had a great day.

We headed back to base for the final things and said sad farewells. Some were remaining at the hotel for one more night, the rest of us began the homeward journey. Many thanks to all for making this such a wonderful weekend and a real pleasure for us both to lead and be a part of; we hope to see you all again soon!

Species Lists

Common name	Scientific name	12/2	13/2
Birds			
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	✓	✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	4	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓
White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		11
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	2	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	10	1
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	8	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	3	
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>		2
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓	
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	40+	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	6+	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	✓	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	10+	50+
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	2	
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	10+	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓	✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	1	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1	7
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	1	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	3	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	1	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	10+	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		3

Common name	Scientific name	12/2	13/2
Birds			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	3
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		3
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	10+	3+
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	20+	15+
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	1	4
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	4	2
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		h
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1+
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	4	1
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓
Shore lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>		4
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	2	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		2
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		1
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1	1
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		1
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	1	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	1	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	5	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	1	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	25	7
Mammals			
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>	✓	✓
Reeves's Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	✓	✓
Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	✓	

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