

Norfolk in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

25th – 26th November 2022

Tour report by Toby Collett



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Tour participants – Toby Collett (Leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Friday 25th November

We met at the Le Strange Arms in Old Hunstanton in the evening, the sun well set so we couldn't enjoy the amazing sea views. Tours at this time of year are pretty much tide and weather led so between the delicious courses we were checking forecasts to make sure all looked good. The tides and weather suited an early start to Snettisham for the wader spectacle and would allow us to get back in time for breakfast. Decision made, it was early nights and fingers crossed the forecast held.

Day 2

Saturday 26th November

Getting up in the dark on holiday may not sound like the most relaxing thing to do but the tides wait for no one so up we get and off we go. Luckily, there really can be no better reason to get up than to witness one of the greatest wildlife spectacles we have in the UK. As the it started to lighten, we heard thousands of Pink-footed Geese stirring. Groups of hundreds took to the skies above us and headed towards their feeding fields. Below the departing geese, the waders were starting to arrive. Pushed in by the rising tide, they were squeezed onto an ever-reducing patch of mud and saltmarsh. Knot, Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed Godwit and Dunlin made up the bulk with smaller groups of Curlew, Sanderling and Grey Plover. Our visit coincided with the month's national Wetland Bird Survey, so we were able to get some reliable numbers from the regular counters.

The Knot were the stars, putting on a fantastic display as they swarmed above us moving onto the pits to roost. When jaws drop in awe at 100,000 birds in front of you, early starts are quickly forgotten. Buzzards, Red Kite and Marsh Harriers were all on the move as well keeping the smaller groups of waders that remained on the saltmarsh on their toes.

As the tide turned, we soaked in the Knot spectacle once more as they left the pits and flew low over our heads onto the newly exposed mud. We got hailed down on the way back by one of the volunteers who was eager to show us a female Black Redstart. It was a shame the local residents weren't as keen for us to enjoy it though so we swiftly moved on. The journey back to breakfast was a much cheerier affair than the drive out this morning, buoyed by the fantastic experience we had all just shared.

With well deserved full English breakfasts consumed, we were on the road and heading east to Cley. We got lucky on the way, finding a huge group of Pink-footed Geese in a field next to the road. Some of the local birders were there and kindly pointed out a Todd's Canada Goose. This is one of the wild species that actually migrate, rather than the larger sedentary goose we are used to. A couple of walkers using the public footpath pushed the geese up and away but it was amazing to be that close to so many geese, the noise being exceptionally loud so close.

We arrived at Cley and made our way out to the pools and hides. Scanning around we picked out the expected waders and wildfowl. Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Redshank, Ruff, Teal Wigeon and Gadwall were all happily feeding in front of us. Two smaller birds arriving with the Dunlin caught the attention and some good views allowed us to identify them as Little Stint. Scanning through the Black-headed Gulls in the hope of finding a Mediterranean Gull drew a blank but we did pick up a first winter Caspian Gull. A few young Herring Gulls were

also close by so we were able to do a nice compare and contrast. We enjoyed some refreshments back at the visitor centre before heading back out to but had no luck looking for the reported Shorelark or Snow Bunting down the East Bank.

With the evening drawing in, we relocated to the harrier roost at Warham Greens. The Pallid Harrier had gone in early, so we missed that but did get three Hen Harriers and double figures of Marsh Harrier. A Barn Owl silently passing us as we walked back was a great way to finish, though it wasn't to be the highlight of the day. That went to a small moth we picked up on the hotel window that evening as we did the log. Thinking it was a funny looking Rustic, we used a combination of apps and experts to conclude that it was in fact an Oak Rustic, a rare species that has only recently been recorded, and only a handful of times, in Norfolk.

Day 3

Sunday 27th November

After a long and bird filled day yesterday and a several of the party needing to get off before dusk, today was a more relaxed affair.

We started at RSPB Titchwell, the recent work on the fresh marsh having immediate effects with birds all over the place. From Island Hide we picked out some of the waders we had seen yesterday but even closer and in good light, allowing us to enjoy the finer details of identification. Mediterranean Gulls on the islands and a couple of Avocet got us discussing if these were very early arrivals or very late departers. The milder winters of late means we can get quite a few hangers on from the breeding season, so these were probably birds chancing the weather holding and not needing to go any further south. A few Snipe were tucked away in the fringes but try as we might, we couldn't pick out a Jack Snipe. Luckily, we had a secret weapon. On the way back we stopped to look for a Greater Scaup down one of the channels and a chance scan with a thermal imager picked out a smaller snipe at the base of the reeds. A challenging half hour later and everyone had seen Jack Snipe as it played hide and seek behind the stems. Luckily, we were there for a while as we had a small party of Bearded Tits 'ping' through but we only got a few glimpses.

Holkham was our next stop. A trip up to the hall to look for woodland species rewarded us with good views of Treecreeper and Nuthatch. A big flock of Redwing were feeding on the lawn, sharing the grass with hundreds of Fallow Deer. A mixed group of Tufted Duck and Pochard were on the lake but we couldn't find anything unexpected in with them. Keeping with the moth theme of the night before, we clocked over 20 distinctive December Moths seeking shelter at the Holkham café, looking out over the marshes.

We finished the day out on the beach. The Shorelark once again proved elusive, but compensation was a group of fantastically close Snow Bunting that flitted and trilled along the sand dunes in front of us. It was certainly a much more relaxed day than Saturday, but nobody minded as we'd seen some fantastic birds and really well too. Never a bad couple of days on the Norfolk tours.

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Checklists

Common name	Scientific name	February		
		25	26	27
Birds				
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			2
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>			4
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓
Todd's Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis interior</i>			1
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		c. 15,000	c.1,500
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>			17
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		40	150
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			20
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		2	20+
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		50+	c.30
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		60+	c.40
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		c.70	c.20
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		c.600	c. 2,500
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		100+	c12
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		c.400	c.1700
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			c.40
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			c.40
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>			1
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			150+
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2	6
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			1
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2	2
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		4	4
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		4	2
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1	2

Common name	Scientific name	February		
		25	26	27
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			5
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		c.24	c.50
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		20+	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		c.20	c.18
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		3	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		2	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		c.5,000	80+
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		2	15
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		c.220	90+
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		250+	900+
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		c.30	6
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		6	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		2	5
Jack Snipe	<i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>			1
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa islandica</i>		3	20
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			c.3,200
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		c.300	c.70
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		20+	c.18
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		c.100,000	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		30+	50+
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		c. 6,000	
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		2	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		c.40	c.250
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		15	c.100
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓
Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>		1	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>			2
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>			2
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓
Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			8
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		♪	c.18
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		♪	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europea</i>			2

Common name	Scientific name	February		
		25	26	27
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			4
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		c. 3,000	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		♪	2
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			40+
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			1
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		1	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		6	4
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		4	2
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		c.30	12
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		1	3
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		2	6
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		4	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		c.20	c.10
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			17
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		2	1
Mammals				
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		1	
Fallow Deer	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			500
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>		1	2
Reeves' Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>		4	4
European Hare	<i>Lepus europeus</i>		✓	✓
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus caolinensis</i>		✓	✓
Moths				
Oak Rustic	<i>Dryobota labecula</i>		1	
December Moth	<i>Poecilocampa populi</i>			20+