

Norfolk in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 23rd February 2023



Brambling



Lapwing

Tour report and images by Toby Collett



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

Day 1

Tuesday 21st February

A mid-afternoon start was a first for me so starting a winter tour in the light was an opportunity to take advantage of. The group was rounded up and soon we were off to RSPB Titchwell to get a few birds under our belt. After navigating the entrance and the feeders, we were disappointed not to get any of the Brambling reported there. We weren't downhearted for long when our attention was drawn to a Water Rail feeding a few meters below us in a ditch. Remarkably showy for what is a very secretive bird. Still smiling from that close encounter, we then chanced on four of the previously missed Brambling in the open just as we cleared the trees. A gorgeous male was the highlight, his yellow bill contrasting nicely against a darkening head.

From the West Bank path, we scanned the saltmarsh for raptors. No luck but we did pick out a Chinese Water Deer. The Freshmarsh was heaving with birds. Recent works have increased habitat diversity and the results are plain to see. Avocet, Golden Plover, Lapwing and Black-headed Gulls made up the bulk, spread out over the islands. In among them we found Turnstone, Ruff and Dunlin with a pair of Mediterranean Gulls making their presence known with their distinctive calls. The sea was our destination with an incoming tide, so we carried on towards the breakers. A brief stop to enjoy close views of Curlew, Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit was interrupted by a hunting Barn Owl. We followed it for 15 minutes as it glided towards us and gave a wonderful flypast.

On the beach we picked out speeding Sanderling sprinting along the shoreline with the more docile Grey Plovers, Bar-tailed Godwits and Oystercatchers wondering what all the fuss is about. On the sea we couldn't find the reported Long-tailed Duck but did get a distant, Black-necked Grebe next to the more expected Great-crested Grebes. Goldeneye, Eider and Red-breasted Merganser were all a little too distant to enjoy.

As the sun dropped in the sky, the temperature followed suit and we made our way back. The reserve was filling with gulls and birds moving to roost and we got lucky picking three Spoonbill out moving towards their Holkham roost. Not a bad way to finish the day and get us well set for the next few days.

Day 2

Wednesday 22nd February

A busy day ahead as we looked to make the most of the light and rain gaps. We started with a dawn visit to Holme. The tide had pushed a few waders up to roost but not as many as hoped for. Fortunately, our second Barn Owl of the trip more than made up for it. Hunting over the marshes we watched it until an unfamiliar call turned our eyes skywards to pick out a displaying male Marsh Harrier. It towered high above us, giving brief stoops and stalls before heading back to earth to jostle with a female. Linnet, Stonechat and Dunnock sat proud on the Buckthorn giving brief bursts of song. As the weather looked to turn we made the decision to head back for breakfast before a chance encounter reversed our decision. One of the bird observatory staff kindly offered to take us to see a roosting Tawny Owl which we unanimously decided was worth getting a bit damp for.

It's never a bad start to the day with two owls before breakfast but we were far from done. Fuelled and refreshed, we headed out towards Cley. On the way, we got lucky and picked out a field of Pink-footed Geese. A quick park and we were enjoying 5,000 through the scope, a female Ruddy Shelduck standing out in the middle of them all.

Another brief stop had us at the Holkham gate overlooking this impressive National Nature Reserve. A couple of Great Egrets, Egyptian Geese and thousands of duck littered the grassland and pools. Buzzards and Marsh Harriers dotted bushes and fence posts while Red Kites cruised overhead. A more detailed grilling didn't yield any of the recent White-fronted Geese and our best efforts couldn't turn any egrets into Spoonbills. A singing Nuthatch in the woodland behind sent us on our way.

With the weather being ok on arrival at Cley, we chanced our arm and fortune and headed to Kelling Heath. Our targets here were Woodlark and Dartford Warbler and the omens appeared good when two of the former flew over us as we disembarked. Unfortunately, this flight view and a few snippets of song on the heath was all we would get of either. A trio of Bullfinch flew through and it was a shame that we only got such a brief view of this splendid bird. A few more Stonechat sat nicely on the way back to the car and on the final scan we picked out the Bullfinch at the back of the car park. Not quite our target but a wonderful bird to enjoy.

We managed to get a few tables in the Cley café and enjoyed some cake and caffeine to keep us going. The thatched hides beckoned, and we headed out. The reserve looks to have recovered from the sea breaches several years back which greatly reduced the quality of the habitat. Lots of hard work and water has flushed the salt away and the reserve looks to be getting back to its bird filled best. Star of the show was the wintering Long-billed Dowitcher. It showed well enough in the scope to go through all the salient features so I have no doubt that everyone in the group will be able to find their own one day... The wildfowl were in nice and close and we went over plumage details of Gadwall, Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler and Pintail. More scrutiny of the fringes picked out a pair of Snipe, Grey Wagtail and a trio of Water Pipits.

Time was ticking on and we headed over to the East Bank and out to the shingle for Snow Buntings. Several hunched shoulders passing us didn't give much hope and we drew an inevitable blank so it was on to our last stop.

The Stiffkey car park overlooks Warham Greens which is great raptor roost site. We picked out lots of Little Egrets and Brent Geese on the marsh but none of the nine Marsh Harriers came in close to study. With the sun set we headed back after our brilliant day, but it wasn't over yet. An emergency stop and disembark had us all gazing up. We were underneath the five thousand Pink-footed Geese we had seen feeding earlier. They spread across the sky filling our field of view and tingling the ears with their distinctive calls. What a finish!

Day 3

Thursday 23rd February

Time and tide wait for no man, which does mean birds come before breakfast on our winter tours. RSPB Snettisham is the big BIG draw on these tours and rightfully so as it never disappoints. Unfortunately, weather apps and forecasts do disappoint. Often. A clear morning with sun peeking through on the weather icons had us all looking forward to the morning but overcast skies had us second guessing. Luckily the birds wouldn't be affected and gave us a memorable experience. It started with the tide squeezing Knot, Dunlin, Oystercatchers and Bar-tailed Godwits up the mudflats towards us. It wasn't only the crowds that had noticed the bird numbers building. A male Peregrine was on the hunt and wowed us all powering through bird clouds as it stirred the flocks. This activity pushed birds onto the pits far sooner than normal and we opted to head to the hides to enjoy the roost. It's hard to understand how that many thousand birds can squeeze into such a small space and can only really be seen to be believed. We enjoyed them with a few pre-breakfast nibbles to keep us going before the peregrine reappeared. As it had done previously, its presence, while amazing for us, wasn't much appreciated by the roosting

waders and they made an early escape back out onto the mud. The tide was still in, so we got to see them swirling above the choppy sea. The wind made it difficult to use the scope to pick bits out but in this sort of environment, no one minded. To fully appreciate the spectacle and place, to truly be in awe, putting the optics down is thoroughly recommended. The rain on the way back did little to dampen the spirits and full breakfasts all around were well earned.

Planned work from Monday to Thursday at Holkham had scuppered our plans to head down Lady Anne's drive but lady luck was on our side and the work had finished a day early. We went for a short walk around the woods with a few targets in mind. As with yesterday, Nuthatches revealed themselves vocally and we were able to track a few down. Huge stands of Ivy were holding good numbers of thrushes. Blackbirds, Redwing, Song Thrush and Mistle Thrush feasted on the berries with an over wintering Chiffchaff in among them. Several large herds of Fallow Deer roamed the lawns with a gang of Oystercatcher probing at their feet. A lone Barnacle Goose belted noisily past as we looked for anything unusual hiding among the Pochard and Tufted Duck flock. A high-pitched call in the trees behind us had us all enjoying a pair of Treecreepers, joined soon after by a couple of Coal Tit.

As we headed back to the car, a flash of a white rump in a group of Chaffinch revealed another fine male Brambling that we were briefly distracted from by a calling Raven returning to its nest. Fleeting glimpses of Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers would be the best we got but with some great birds under our belt we were happy to jump back in the van and head down to the beach.

As we gathered for refreshments, a scan of the grassland revealed a pair of Grey Partridge on the other side of the ditch in front of us. There had been no reports of the target Snow Bunting and Shore Lark but that wouldn't deter us from not giving it a go. Arriving on the beach we picked up four Rock Pipits giving us a chance to go over their features and compare with the previous days Water Pipits. The resulting scan of the usual spots drew a blank on our targets but as is always the case, there's always something to see. The usual shy and retiring group of White-fronted Geese wanted a wing stretch so had taken that opportunity to do that right over our heads. No chance on us not picking out those distinctive belly bars when you're looking right up at them in the sun. A sweep of the falling tide found 200 Common Scoter diving just beyond the breakers, our last new birds of the day. On the way back to the car we enjoyed another Spoonbill fly past and found one of the scarce 'Silver' Hares of Holkham which disappeared into the thistles before we could all enjoy it though the telescope. A fine end to a cracking day and brilliant weekend.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	February		
		21	22	23
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2	
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>			2
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	c.2,000	C,10,500	c.2,500
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>			150+
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	100+	400	800
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			1
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		20+	20+
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	20+	c.60	c.70
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	6	6	10
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	20+	c.80	c.50
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	16+	8+	12
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	30+	c.500	c.1400
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	14	c.1200	c1,600
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	8		c.30
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			c.30
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			250+
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	6	4	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	5		
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		♪	3
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	8+	6	2
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	1		
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leu</i>	3		1
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		4	2

Common name	Scientific name	February		
		21	22	23
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	2	3
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	c.60	c.30	c.60
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	1
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	8+	c.24	c.12
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1	1	1
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			3
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	1		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	20	300	c.2,500
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	50+	60+	150+
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	c.150	c.200	30+
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	50+	100+	600+
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	7	c.10	c.10
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		4	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>		3	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	2	2	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa islandica</i>	1	c.60	c.50
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	40		c.1200
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	8	c.120	c.90
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	6	25+	6
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	15+	c.40	c.250
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	7	40+	c.100
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			C,40,000
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	40	14	250+
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	40		
Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>		1	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>	2		
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1	50	4
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		60	10
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove			✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	1		2
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		♫	
Green Woodpecker			♫	
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>Periparus ater</i>			4
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		♫	20+
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		3	

Common name	Scientific name	February		
		21	22	23
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	♪	♪	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		2	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		♪	2
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			10+
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			2
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	5	1
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		4	2
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	3	5	4
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		3	
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	2	2	4
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	10	2	6
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		3	
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	4		1
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	10+	30	15
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	2	2	1
Mammals				
Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	1	1	
Fallow Deer	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			400
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>	1		
Reeves' Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	1	2	4
European Hare	<i>Lepus europeus</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	1		
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus caolinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓