

# Norfolk in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th – 9th March 2023

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Report and images by Toby Collett

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Naturetrek    Mingledown Barn    Wolf's Lane    Chawton    Alton    Hampshire    GU34 3HJ    UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)



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

## Day 1

Tuesday 7th March

We met at the Le Strange Arms just after 3pm and just in time for a snow squall! With good light but bad weather forecast in patches, we decided to head to RSPB Titchwell where we had the luxury of hides to dive into if the weather turned. A nosey round the car park to start didn't produce the hoped for Woodcock or Brambling but just after passing the Visitor Centre we were treated to a gorgeous Barn Owl fly-past. A squawk and flutter of wings indicated a tussle between the Barn Owl and an incoming Kestrel which brought out a second owl. Not a bad start at all. We dropped into Island Hide to point blank views of a handful of Teal up ending in front of us. To the right, an area of cut reed held a hiding Snipe but out on the islands and water, the birds were anything but retiring.

Scanning an island full of Black-headed Gulls, a pair of actual black-headed gulls stood out. Pristine adult Mediterranean Gulls are hard to beat and it was great to see them side by side with their commoner cousins. Avocets and Black-tailed Godwits fed in the shallow water while Pintail, Gadwall and Shoveler dabbled in the deeper areas. A handful of Turnstone darted around the legs of the gulls with the odd Dunlin feeding on the island shore. Further back, a hundred each of Lapwing and Golden Plover sat out on the bank.

A snow flurry passed and we chanced a wander to the beach. It was brisk and while there was nothing close, a large group of Oystercatchers and Bar-tailed Godwits were gathered further down, with Sanderling running round their feet. With the light starting to go we started back to give ourselves time to enjoy our target bird. We found a group of Grey Plover and Ringed Plover on the tidal pool and two Chinese Water Deer were out on the saltmarsh. A Cetti's Warbler appeared briefly in the suaeda below the footpath giving good views to a lucky few. We headed over to the left hand side of the Parrinder Hide and immediately had our prize. A Spoonbill was standing proud in the channel in front with a second bird striding towards it and a third asleep a few islands back. Gulls were pouring in for a pre-roost drink and wash and while watching these we picked out another two Spoonbills arriving at the back. Supper was calling so we gathered ourselves and headed back to the car park, enjoying another pair of Spoonbills flying in. The final field next to the visitor centre was scanned for owls but instead we picked out nine different Chinese Water Deer and a couple of Muntjacs. Absolute deerfest.

While doing the log and trying to make our food selections from an excellent menu we were once again checking the changeable forecast. The weather looked OK for the morning but not great for Thursday so we decided to make the most of it. An early night for all and alarm times for a pre-breakfast wander was agreed.



Titchwell snow cloud

## Day 2

## Wednesday 8th March

We took the short drive to Holme just before 7am. The tide was in though the large swell meant finding anything on the sea would be tricky. We started in a similar theme to Titchwell with a Barn Owl one of the first birds we saw. Marsh Harriers were drifting back and forth over the grassland and the saltmarsh was full of calling Curlew and Redshank. The boardwalk runs along the top of the dunes giving elevated views and safe passage through the spiky sea buckthorn. A small group of Linnet were on the Sea Buckthorn in front of us and just down to the right a couple of Stonechat.

We got some height at the top of the dunes which gave us views over the sea, beach and grassland. A handful of Red-breasted Merganser flew low with a tag along singleton being all dark with big white wing patches - a Velvet Scoter. We picked up another Barn Owl in the distance that looped round and came closer. On the beach, Oystercatchers and Cormorants sat out the tide with some large gulls in attendance. Two Muntjac were in the hollow below us, one curled up having a snooze while the other grazed. Conscious that the weather would be turning we made our way back towards the car. A medium sized grey wader caught the eye on the saltmarsh and with optics swivelling to check it out we were all enjoying a silvery Greenshank chasing after breakfast.

After breakfast we made our way to Holkham. A quick stop at the top gate had us scanning the grasslands, picking out Great Egret, a huge group of White-fronted Geese, Egyptian Geese, Buzzards, Marsh Harriers and Red Kites. The place was heaving. We relocated to Lady Anne's Drive to head down to the beach. As blowy as it was, the group of 10 Shorelark soon warmed us up. There were several bright sunny faced birds in there, contrasting with the chilly conditions. We looked to complete the loop and headed back via the dunes on the off chance of Snow Bunting. We didn't get lucky with those but just off shore we were treated to a 1,500 strong group of Common Scoter. The wind was starting to cut through us so a good time to break for some coffee and soup for lunch. As is often the case when eating at these great reserves, the wildlife watching never stops and this was the case today. As we gathered round the table to eat, a Brown Hare was on the other side of the window, just a few metres away at eye level. Hunkered in behind a tussock it had a scratch and stretch but didn't leave the spot for the whole time we were there. While most Pink-footed Geese have left the area by this time of year, we did see a couple of hundred down in the wet bits, feeding alongside good numbers of Teal and Wigeon. They all got a bit of a fright when a fairly sizeable female Peregrine cruised low but then relaxed as it climbed up over the trees.

After warning up we headed into the main Holkham estate to get out of the wind and have a look for some woodland species to get some variety. Considering how bright it was, the woodlands were very quiet which we could only put down to the low temperatures. We had an uneventful walk to the lake bird-wise but being in the company of hundreds of Fallow Deer isn't all that bad. We enjoyed groups of Pochard, Tufted Duck, Gadwall and Great Crested Grebe and a Grey Wagtail was tucked away on the shore. A group of Great Tits were whizzing about the bushes and we picked out a couple of Treecreepers and Nuthatch in the same spot. A Raven 'gronked' overhead as we turned to head back and a Buzzard glided effortlessly through the trees.

We moved on to Wells to see if we could have a look for Redpoll and Siskin in the birch but a snow flurry soon blew this away as an option. We would finish the day at North Point Pools. A scan of the pools found a Mediterranean Gull and a few Avocet among the usual suspects. We were a bit early to catch the roost but we did head down to the sea wall and saltmarsh. A good choice to chance it as we had our third Barn Owl of the day and seven Spoonbill on the marsh among loads of Curlew and Little Egret. Several Marsh Harriers were around but not the hoped for Hen. With the forecast not looking great for tomorrow we decided it was best to not push it and save our strength. We made our way back to the car park and started on our way back for another delicious supper.



Brown Hare



Shorelark

### Day 3

### Thursday 9th March

With the forecast being wet and windy, we headed to Cley, knowing that if the weather was to turn we had some great hides and a café to shelter in. On arrival it wasn't looking too bad so made a beeline for the shingle shore. A trio of Water Pipits feeding in a patch of cut reed were very tricky to get eyes on so we cut our losses and kept moving. The shelter over Arnold's Marsh lived up to its name and did just that as the first snow shower fell. While there wasn't much on the marsh, a group of 30 smaller birds on the shingle ridge caught the attention and when the clouds opened up we headed that way. It was appropriate that after seeing Shorelark on the shore that the snow would fall while watching Snow Bunting. We got some good views of them feeding then tried to get upwind so we wouldn't have to watch through watering eyes. We dipped below to their feeding area and walked round to where we thought would be 30m from them. To our surprise and delight they had moved a bit further along, weren't bothered by our presence and came even closer once we had settled down to enjoy them. An amazing experience.

Another snowy squall was our cue to go and we made our back to the centre. Cakes and coffees were well received and even more appreciated given the wintry conditions outside. We waited for our moment and headed out towards the thatched trio of hides. Black-tailed Godwits and Dunlin fed on the island edges with Avocet, Wigeon and Teal making up the bulk of the rest. We went through an identification refresher and tips on how to birdwatch at a habitat and location like this. Just as we were about to wrap up, a small bird flew down in front of the hide. It was one of the Water Pipits we had struggled to see earlier and now it was clear and in the open; what a treat. We were able to have a good look at all the features as it fed along the muddy bank. Not a bad way to finish for lunch and we made our way back to the café. The weather didn't look like letting up so after a relaxed break, it was agreed to head back to hotel. Certainly a day of quality over quantity and driving home in the dry is much preferable to having soggy socks.



Snow Bunting



Water Pipit

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## Checklists

Common name	Scientific name	March		
		7	8	9
Birds				
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	2	3	4
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>		200+	
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		100+	
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	600+	1200+	c. 60
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		100+	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		20+	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	20+	8	12
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	35+	10	28
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	6	18	7
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	50+	1600+	100+
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	8		4
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	30+	160+	80+
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya farina</i>	1	c.20	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	2	c.20	
Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>		1	
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		1500	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		20+	10+
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	2	4	2
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2	3
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1	4	3
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1	1
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	6	7	4
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		2	



Common name	Scientific name	March		
		7	8	9
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	9	7	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	20+	15	10
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	2	20+	8
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	8	10	6
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		8	2
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	3	3	1
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	100+	28	10
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	80+	6	26
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	c150	c30	c80
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	60+	500+	c100
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	10+	30+	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	2		
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	2	3	5
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa islandica</i>	40+	c30	c12
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	100+	80+	70+
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	40+	60+	30+
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	37	19	16
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	c.16		
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	14		9
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	c. 8	c.30	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	35+	20+	20+
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		2	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	2	1	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	4	6	15
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		♫	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	3		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>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	4	50+	
Shorelark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>		10	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	♫	♫	1
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	2	4	2

Common name	Scientific name	March		
		7	8	9
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europea</i>		3	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		5	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	1	♫	2
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		8	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	4	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	6	1
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinera</i>		1	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	20+	8	6
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>			4
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	3	2	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	20+	7	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	40+	16	4
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	1	5	6
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			c. 30
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	1	2	1
<b>Mammals</b>				
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		1	
Fallow Deer	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		500	
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		3	
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>	9	6	
Reeves' Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	7	8	2
European Hare	<i>Lepus europeus</i>	2	4	9
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus caolinensis</i>		✓	✓