

Norfolk in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th-30th November 2023



Waxwings, Holt

Tour report by Brian Small



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Tour participants: Brian Small (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

Summary

As to be expected, our 'Norfolk in Winter' tour was blessed with rather chilly weather – temperatures barely rose above 0°C for the three days and I think the maximum was 1°C, but in a stiff north or north-east breeze it felt much colder! Despite this, we had some sun and superb moments which warmed us: Snow Buntings, Shore Larks and three Northern Bullfinches at Holkham Gap; close-range Great Northern and Red-throated Divers at Holme; Waxwings at various places; Barn and Short-eared Owls; but for sheer spectacle it was hard to beat the skeins of 1000s of Brent and Pink-footed Geese wheeling about the marshes and fields, glowing in the low winter sunlight.



Pink-footed Geese, Hunstanton

Staying at Old Hunstanton, we had a fine base from which to head out to all the key localities: Holkham, Cley and Stiffkey, plus Titchwell, Holme and both Brancaster and Burnham Overy Staithe. Short days meant we had to pack as much in as possible, though as the sun lowered any warmth quickly drained from the air and our fingers!

Day 1

Tuesday 28th November

Arrival at Old Hunstanton & a walk on the mudflats

A mid-afternoon arrival at the Le Strange Arms, Old Hunstanton, gave us the chance to take an hour-long walk on Hunstanton mudflats from the hotel. As the sun lowered over the Wash, we wrapped up warm and walked the sands, watching the Oystercatchers, Sanderling and Curlew, among which we picked out the odd Bar- and Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and Ringed Plover. Over the sea in the last light of day, we just about saw the ghostly yet distinct shapes of several Fulmar cruising about.

Walking back we found the rear part of the backbone of a Minke Whale, which apparently someone had been trying to take (illegally) off the beach. Hefty and sizeable, but also a little smelly...

Day 2

Wednesday 29th November

Holkham Freshmarsh and Gap, Holt, Cley and Stiffkey

After breakfast we headed east, eventually reaching Cley. It was to be a very cold day with temperatures reaching just 1°C. The first stop was at a layby which looked over Holkham freshmarsh, from which we saw plenty of interesting birds and mammals: Chinese Water Deer and Muntjac; 1000s of Pink-footed Geese wheeling about and settling in the fields; White-fronted and Egyptian Geese; Buzzards, Marsh Harriers and Red Kite; Little and Great Egrets, plus a bonus Cattle Egret sat on the back of a cow.

Next up was Lady Anne's Drive and Holkham Gap, just a short drive away. As ever, it was hard to tear ourselves away from the multitude of duck and geese, though this time there were Redwings and Mistle Thrush to see also. Helen found a lively Chiffchaff flycatching about the sunny sheltered edge of a Holm Oak, constantly pumping its tail it was a little ray of sunshine; a couple of Goldcrests too were very nice in the pines.



Shore Larks and a Snow Bunting

Through Holkham Gap we were greeted by a chattering flock of dark-bellied Brent Geese, a nice mix of juveniles and adults, and it was especially nice to see a single pale-bellied Brent Goose among them. Walking east from the gap, we headed for a small fenced-off area, where we hoped to find Shore Larks, though our hopes were a little dampened by some birders walking back who had not seen them. However, fortune favours the brave (and the cold!) and we persevered as a dense cloud came in making the light conditions poor; as hail and sleet fell we heard the Snow Buntings and enjoyed a flock of 31 for some time as they flew about and fed on the saltmarsh. Skylarks and Meadow Pipits joined them, but still no Shore Larks. Three Northern Bullfinches called and fed in the Sea Buckthorn – their call is deeper and softer than ‘normal’ and they have a more ghostly appearance with greyer upperparts and softer pastel pink underparts. As ever, they were flighty and skeddaddled too quickly.

From the dunes we had a very cold look at a choppy sea, but suddenly the distinct call of a Shore Lark could be heard from the Snow Bunting flock and as they wheeled about at least two could be seen in flight. We quickly got them in the 'scope from our viewpoint, finding three more, but soon strolled round to the south side of the fenced area and got some good closer views of all five, though the light was especially bad at this point.

The morning was almost over by the time we left, but there was one more stop to make before lunch at Cley. Making the short diversion to Holt, we were lucky to see five of a small flock Waxwing which had almost stripped an ornamental Rowan of its yellow berries. We mostly saw them as they sat atop tall trees digesting the fruit before making brief visits to feed. And so to lunch at Cley NWT visitor centre, overlooking the famous marshes with Avocet and Black-tailed Godwit feeding on the pools. Afterwards, we walked along East Bank, seeing yet more Wigeon and Teal, Snipe, Lapwing – iridescent green in the sun – and a Peregrine which put the wind up everything bar the Snipe.

Returning along the coast road, we had a couple of stops. Firstly, we paused at Stiffkey campsite car park to look for raptors, walking west along the muddy path to a viewing area and finding our own calling Waxwing in the Hawthorn as we did. The local Marsh Harriers and Red Kites were beginning to arrive to roost, but we also enjoyed a couple of Merlins sat in the *Suaeda* – a little distant but always great to see. Finally, we pulled into Lady Anne's Drive in the hope we could look back to see a Barn Owl spotted on a post as we drove along. In doing so, our day ended with fine views of it as it hunted an area of scrub, dropping feet-first into the thistles. It was not to the liking of a local male Kestrel!

Day 3

Thursday 30th November

Holme NOA, Titchwell RSPB, Brancaster & Burnham Overy Staithes



Great Northern Diver, Holme

Another cold and breezy day dawned, and we 'enjoyed' some spells of warmer (OK, less cold) sunshine and some very dark skies which threatened snow! 1°C in the sun, it felt colder in the teeth of the wind on Titchwell beach. Holme NOA was our first port of call: we found two more Waxwings as we drove the track to the car park, and we then ambled along the Peddar's Way footpath through the dunes to the beach. In the dunes we saw a male Stonechat and fine female Kestrel, while over the fields and ditches were Marsh Harriers and Buzzards,

and beyond them huge numbers of Pink-footed Geese rose above the village and flew into the marshes. A Bittern was picked up in flight, but as ever it was brief and soon dropped into the reeds.

Looking at the sea from the dunes and beach, we had some very exciting birds: three Great Northern Diver – one of which flew to land close inshore; a Red-throated Diver which flew along the beach; Eider and Common Scoter out at sea; Grey Plover, Knot, Turnstone, Bar-tailed Godwit and Curlew on the beach.



Golden Plover, Titchwell

At Titchwell, we watched a nice flock by the vehicle which held numerous Long-tailed and Coal Tits, Goldcrest and a Treecreeper. Two Siskin flew over, and then we had a quick hot chocolate or coffee before our walk to the beach. A couple of Chiffchaff called along the path and a young Marsh Harrier hunted the marshes; on the freshmarsh many ducks and geese slept, most sheltering from the wind. A flock of Golden Plover sat on a distant island, but having been flushed by a harrier flew closer, glowing in the sun they were joined by four Ruff. Out on the beach, a very dark cloud luckily skirted past offshore, but the wind was bitter and we didn't last long, just enough to find a Long-tailed Duck close in and a slick of 1500 Common Scoter 800m out. Three Spoonbill flew east heading towards Brancaster.

After lunch we headed to Brancaster ourselves and found the Spoonbills feeding in a creek by the staithe, along with Grey Plover, Turnstone, Rock Pipit and a Herring Gull which picked up mussels and dropped them onto the car park to smash them open. Our final stop was Burnham Overy Staithe, from which we made a short walk along the sea wall towards Holkham pines. Over the sunlit fields, glowing in the winter sun, many Brents and Pinkfeet fed and flew; Fieldfares fed in the Hawthorns; but best of all was a Short-eared Owl which flew up from the dunes to mob both a Marsh Harrier then a Red Kite. Our last new bird of the trip and a fine way to end.

We said our farewells back at the hotel, before heading our separate ways. Thanks to all for a great few days!

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Species Lists

Birds (I = Introduced)

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023		
		28	29	30
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla bernicla</i>	✓	✓	✓
Pale-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>		1	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		12	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓
Egyptian Goose - I	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓	✓
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>	40		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		3	3
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		✓	2000
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			1
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		3	2
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Red-legged Partridge - I	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓	✓
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023		
		28	29	30
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			5
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		12	10
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>	2		1
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	4		20
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		1	5
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓	✓	✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓
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>	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			1
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			3
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		1	1
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			3
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>			1
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		2	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1	1
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1	
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			1
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		2	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>		5+1	2+25

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023		
		28	29	30
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			3
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			2
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓
Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>		5	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		h	1
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1	2
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		3	2
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			1
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		2	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			35
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			2
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		3	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		h	2
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			2
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		31	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023		
		28	29	30
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓	✓
Chinese Water Deer - I	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>		✓	✓
Reeves' Muntjac - I	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>		✓	✓
European Hare - I	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓	✓
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eastern Grey Squirrel - I	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	