

Norfolk in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 3rd March 2024



Barnacle Geese by Bernard Rochester



Chinese Water Deer by Bernard Rochester



Holkham view by Alison Redmond



Fulmars by Alison Redmond

Tour report by Mike Crewe



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Summary

Despite the threat of rain looming over us, the weather treated us remarkably well; we dodged the odd, brief, shower and had some wonderful wildlife experiences along the North Norfolk coast. The mildness of the winter seemed to have led to an early departure of most of the region's wintering Pink-footed Geese, but Brent Geese were present in large numbers and provided quite the spectacle at times. Smart, White-fronted Geese and boisterous Barnacle Geese added to the show and great flocks of Wigeon and Teal carpeted the coastal marshes. Golden Plover glittered against a setting sun and raptors were quite simply outstanding with Common Buzzards, Marsh Harriers and Red Kites seeming almost always to be in view somewhere. A Short-eared Owl hunting over the saltings and two magnificent Barn Owls were all gleefully enjoyed, as was a superb adult male, Hen Harrier.

Pied Avocets, Black-tailed Godwits and Common Redshanks filled the freshwater wetlands, while Sanderling, Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstones, Eurasian Curlews and oodles of Oystercatchers filled the sandy expanse of beach. As well as all of this bird activity, we also enjoyed some interesting mammals, including two parties of Roe Deer and some impressive gatherings of Hares. Finally, there was some nice woodland and parkland activity, with a remarkable number of Treecreepers and Nuthatches enjoyed against a backdrop of waves of Fallow Deer and wonderful 'cronks' from the local Ravens.

Day 1

Friday 1st March

Our first day gave us a chance for an evening meet up at our hotel and to get to know each other over dinner, but with the days starting to draw out now, there was time for a very busy and bird-filled walk at Titchwell for a couple of hours. On arrival at the RSPB reserve, we were soon checking the bird feeders, where a Muntjac and a Moorhen looked rather incongruous! One feeder proved particularly of interest to Bramblings and we saw three different birds visiting it, while the Chaffinches seemed to prefer the ground. We took the trail out through the willows and managed to find the local Tawny Owl that favours an annoyingly dense patch of ivy. In the event, a few stripy breast feathers was about all we could claim, but it was our first owl of the trip!

Out on the marsh, signs of early spring were in evidence. Boisterous parties of Common Pochard and Tufted Duck were on the first lagoon in the reeds, a Little Grebe 'whinnied' from cover and Cetti's Warblers shouted invisibly at us. On the saltings, the expected Brent Geese were joined by several Chinese Water Deer, two Little Egrets and a few Redshanks. The main freshwater lagoon was alive with noisy Black-headed Gulls in various states of acquiring their brown hoods. There were also over 100 Mediterranean Gulls present, in all their ghostly whiteness, while waders included many Avocets and a scattering of Curlews, Redshanks and Dunlin. The shining beacons amongst the waders were the Golden Plovers – even more golden with the help of the setting sun – and the metallic green Lapwings. Teal, Gadwall, Mallard, Wigeon, Shelduck and Pintail all added to the mix, while overhead, Marsh Harriers steadily grouped together before heading to roost. Perched harriers gave great views – as did a wonderfully white-headed 'Continental' Great Cormorant, but the saltings produced the star turns, first in the guise of a superb adult male Hen Harrier hunting Linnets, then in the form of a wonderful Short-eared Owl that tussled with a Marsh Harrier before quartering the marshes for dinner.

With the sun setting and the temperature dropping, we slowly left behind the raucous splendour of the marsh and headed back for a wash and scrub up before dinner.

Day 2

Saturday 2nd March

There was an enthusiastic turn out for the short, pre-breakfast walk along the beach from the hotel to the cliffs. Though the beach was busy with birds, the water was still a good couple of hours from high tide so much of the activity was a little far away. But the cliffs provided us with excellent views of the local Fulmar population, now back at their breeding ledges and squabbling for the best spots. Oystercatchers, Redshanks and Curlews were out on the mud and our first Red-breasted Mergansers and Great Crested Grebes were on the sea.

After a very filling breakfast, we drove eastwards and spent the morning at the Holkham Estate. Immediately on arrival, we were surrounded by bird activity as the wet fields abounded with a great range of ducks, busy Curlew and Redshank and a very close Black-tailed Godwit. A Mistle Thrush added to the mix and we continued to add to our already amazing counts of Red Kites, Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards, which were soaring around sometimes in groups of up to six at a time. As we headed towards the dunes, a very obliging pair of Grey Partridges fed quietly nearby and we marvelled at some impressive Holm Oaks. The beach soon spread itself out before us and we tossed a coin to decide which direction to head. We soon picked out a party of Scandinavian Rock Pipits, though we had to make do with flight views and a little further on, we came across a scattering of Skylarks and Ringed Plovers. The wind made the beach difficult to cover well and a quick scan of the sea revealed plenty of Common Scoter, but the flock was too far away to be able to scan through properly today.

Heading back into the dunes, we paused for a while at Washington Hide and found Grey Herons and Great Egrets out on the marsh, along with more Marsh Harriers – of course! Walking on further, we struggled a little with the wet path but eventually made it – via some antlion traps and fresh Barn Owl pellets – to the Jordan Hide. From here, we had a good view over the local heronry, where frosty-headed Great Cormorants were already tending to their nests. Parties of White-fronted and Egyptian Geese mixed with the Greylags and we were delighted to find three Spoonbills feeding in the pools. Grey clouds were beginning to gather and we had a few brief showers as we headed back, but things eased as we paused at a pool to enjoy a Little Grebe and the scaly splendour of a male Gadwall at close quarters.

We took lunch at the Holkham café then took an inland route back west, scouring the fields for anything of interest. We failed to find any Pink-footed Geese today, but we had much more luck with nesting Red Kites, casual Hares, a couple of parties of Roe Deer and a plethora of Red-legged Partridges. We found Stock Doves in the fields and Yellowhammers in the hedges, but did not expect to see a fellow with a Golden Eagle on his arm! If anyone was tracking our route, it must have looked very peculiar as we circled back and forth along the backroads. Eventually we decided to call a halt to the wild goose chase (which it had become!) and head to Holme.

On the way, we encountered a little terrier looking lost and forlorn in the middle of nowhere and he eagerly leaped into the minibus to share the front seat with us. The best option seemed to be to stop by at the local pub at the next village we came across and, miraculously perhaps, it seemed they knew the owner and took over the task of returning our four-legged friend.

Rounding off the day at Holme proved a grand idea as we quickly got back into good numbers of Marsh Harriers, a wide range of now familiar wetland birds and a party of six Cattle Egrets, hanging out with the local Konik herd. Shortly after this, a male Barn Owl entered our space and time and performed staggeringly well, quartering the open ground before us for as long as we wanted to watch and even perching for a while, too. Out on the beach, we walked out quite a way to get closer to the birds and found a great range of waders present, including our first Grey Plover, Ruddy Turnstones and Red Knot. The sun was getting low in the sky and we made our way back to base (catching sight of the Barn Owl again on the way) in time for a wash and brush up before dinner.

Day 3

Sunday 3rd March

The rainy front seemed to have moved through by this morning and, though it was a cloudy day, it was to remain dry all day. After breakfast, we headed back to the Holkham Estate, this time taking in the deer park and lake. After a nice encounter with Goldcrests and Long-tailed Tits at the car park, sweeping herds of Fallow Deer greeted us almost immediately on arrival in the park itself. Jay was soon added to our list but the smaller birds kept us waiting and it took several attempts and 'heard onlys' before we eventually pinned down an obliging Nuthatch. After that, things started to come together; nice scope views of a female Great Spotted Woodpecker pulling a dead branch apart, a veritable plethora of Treecreepers at almost every turn and great scope views of one of the local Common Ravens that are one of the more recent additions to the area's breeding list.

On the expansive lawns, flocks of Oystercatchers pulled up worms and a boisterous group of some 200 feral Barnacle Geese blustered about. The lake was busy with Greylag Geese but not much else at first, though later we added Great Crested and Little Grebes and a few groups of Pochard, Gadwall and Tufted Ducks. Further round, amongst continuing Treecreepers, we found a very obliging Goldcrest and admired one of larger and more impressive Holm Oaks. We made our way back to the car park via a grassy route, to avoid the worst of the paths, which were pretty muddy due to some recent woodland management activity.

For lunch, we headed back to The Lookout, picking up the same two Grey Partridges, which seemed to have moved not much more than six feet in the past 24 hours! We then made an attempt at visiting Stiffkey Fen, but the path was just too muddy and almost impassable without waders! So, we took a circular route back to Wells, heading inland first to Langham, where we found a wonderful 23 Hares in a single field, with some getting a little flirty at times. At Wells, we finished off our day at the North Pools on the Holkham Estate. There was a hive of activity here, with several Avocets in the water, surrounded by bathing gulls, the latter including three Lesser Black-backed Gulls that had probably just recently returned from wintering grounds further south. Two Common Snipe were almost successful in hiding amongst the Wigeon and Lapwings, with the sound of the latter species in display flight being a wonderful memory of days gone by. Several hundred Brent Geese dropped in to bathe and were diligently searched through for something rarer (to no avail!) and the whole scene was, as like everywhere else this weekend, awash with raptors. Marsh Harriers were particularly of interest here with an adult male persistently calling from the top of a hawthorn and a wing-tagged female leading to speculation as to its movements. A Barn Owl was a wonderful find here, perched at first on a fence post, then hunting silently along the back of the marsh.

And that about wrapped things up for this wonderful weekend on the bird-rich Norfolk coast. Thanks to all for being great fun and a pleasure to spend time with.

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Species lists

Birds (h = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	March 2024		
		1	2	3
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	✓	✓	✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	1		
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			200+
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		40+	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		2	3
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	10+	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	10+	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	6+	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	20+	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	2		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	30+		8
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	30+	6	15
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		✓	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>		✓	✓
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓	✓
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	March 2024		
		1	2	3
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	h		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	3		✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	h	1	5
Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>	1		
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		4	1
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	✓		12
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	30+	✓	✓
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	250		
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		1	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		10	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		1	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	10+	1	4
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		10+	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		3	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	2	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1		2
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	100+	2	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		2	3
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		30	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		3	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		6	11
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		5	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		3	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	4	✓	4
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	2
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	10+	✓	✓
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1		
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	2	30+	25+
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	20	✓
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1	1
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1		
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	1		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1+

Common name	Scientific name	March 2024		
		1	2	3
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			h
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		3	1
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	2	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		1	3
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>		✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h	h
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		1	3
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			4+
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		h	10+
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	h		h
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			h
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓		✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		2	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	1	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		8	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	3		
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		30+	
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	1		2

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	March 2024		
		1	2	3
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		1	
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓	✓

Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>	4	✓	
Reeves's Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	1	✓	✓
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		11	
Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>			✓