

Norfolk in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 6th September 2020

Report compiled by Toby Collett



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Participants: Toby Collett (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Friday 4th September

With no Norfolk Spring tours this year, it was great to be back out with a new tour in a familiar location. While Norfolk is well known for some special breeding and wintering birds, its location on the east coast of England puts it front and centre for enjoying migration in Spring and Autumn. The six of us met in the lobby of the Le Strange hotel and were quickly discussing the weekends plans over supper. As strange as it was chatting through facemasks and at distance in the foyer, we followed the hotel guidance and had a good evening, raring to go for the morning.

Day 2

Saturday 5th September

With a pre-dawn start, we were very appreciative of a takeaway breakfast to give us as much time at Snettisham as possible. While the tide didn't push the 30,000 Knot onto the pits at Snettisham, it did squeeze them all into the smallest part of the mudflats. A Merlin zipped through in front of us as we walked to the wader watchpoint hopefully to see some movement. Our luck was in as a Peregrine zoomed low and the waders erupted and put on a show. Swirling and wheeling, flashing dark and white in the sun, it was spectacular and well worth the early start. Other raptors seen that morning were Red Kite, Marsh Harrier, Kestrel, Buzzard and Sparrowhawk. As we headed back, we got some great views of a mixed flock of Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Dunlin roosting close in on the shingle. Just before the car park we found a nice, sheltered spot and sifted through a tit flock. Alongside the usual and expected Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits, we picked out some nice warblers with Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap and Chiffchaff sitting in the sun.

With breakfast being eaten on the hoof, we were able to crack on with the day and headed to a new wetland site just outside Wells. North Point Pools have been recently created so a bit of an unknown spot but with a good track record of birds in its short lifetime. Six Spoonbill greeted us while a trio of Marsh Harriers quartered the fields behind them followed by a Hobby, our fourth falcon of the day. A scan of the muddy bits produced Black-tailed Godwit, Wood Sandpiper, a couple of Green Sandpipers and 10 Ruff. A Swift overhead would be the only one of the weekend.

We headed to 'The Lookout' at Holkham for lunch and some great views over the grasslands. More Marsh Harriers were seen, and we added Red Kite to the raptor list. A walk through the woods produced a handful of Goldcrests, Willow Warblers and Chiffchaff as we headed to the west end of the reserve. A Great Egret was patrolling the reedy edge of a ditch while a Cetti's Warbler belted out its song from cover. A cut through the trees flushed a Green Woodpecker on the dunes and a quick scan of the sea produced a single Fulmar.

Holkham has hit the headlines this year with by hosting the first ever breeding Cattle Egret for the county. While they weren't on the reserve when we were there, they had been seen just up the road at Burnham Overy. They can be tricky to see in the longer grass and we would need to be in luck and have the cows nearby. And boy, we were lucky. Halfway down the track we saw the herd of cows and some white dots at their feet. Hooray! We counted three and the cows came closer. Four... five.....six... and the cows came closer. The cows then stayed put but the Cattle Egrets then came closer and soon we were watching 10 of them feeding in the long grass

about 40 metres away. What a treat! The little covey of Grey Partridge next to them hardly got a look in. The cows slowly caught up with the egrets and they moved off together. We headed down to the sea bank to try for owls and waders in the creek. We got a good lot of Curlew and a flyby Great Egret in the distance for our troubles.

We'd definitely worked up an appetite, so it was back to the hotel for a socially distanced supper and some planning for tomorrow.

Day 3

Sunday 6th September

We try to get a pre-breakfast walk in but sunrise and breakfast times didn't really work so it was an optional hour's seawatch or lie in. You can scan the sea from the hotel car park, so it was a pretty convenient place to be at first light. While most opted for an extra hour preparation time, a couple of us enjoyed some movement at high tide. A Curlew Sandpiper was feeding with Dunlin, Sanderling, Bar-tailed Godwit and Ringed Plovers on the shore while a Great Skua harried terns and gulls offshore.

After breakfast we headed over to Holme for a walk along the dunes. The birds we'd seen from the hotel car park earlier that morning were much closer and more abundant. While we didn't see Great Skua, a few Long-tailed Skuas were moving offshore, harrying Sandwich Terns alongside the larger Arctic Skuas. Scanning along the shoreline revealed Knot, Sanderling, Grey Plover, Oystercatcher and a mixed gull gathering. The sea held two Red-throated Diver but nothing much more to hold our attention. We clocked 38 Pink-footed Geese coming in off the sea, the first arriving winter birds in Norfolk this year. A big flock of Linnet flitted through the bushes behind us, and our attentions were drawn away from the sea. A quartet of Stonechat were dotted around, allowing us time to watch their behavior and how they differed from the perched Linnets. With time ticking, we headed west as I had a surprise up my sleeve. A classic Norfolk coast Autumn delight.

We arrived at Weybourne car park and made our way along the ridge to a specific patch of gorse. A line of sea anglers dotted the shingle below us and we picked out a Guillemot riding the breakers. A small group of birders we gathered ahead which is always a good sign your quarry is still present, though the words, "we haven't seen it for an hour..." didn't give us that much confidence. We started our vigil and practice paid off that morning as all the group picked out Stonechats dotted about. A few funny ones were mixed in, differing in structure, tone and plumage, Whinchat! Another great Autumn bird to catch up with. As we were going through the finer detail of 'Chat' identification, a flick of grey revealed our target on the floor. The incredibly patterned plumage of a Wryneck is something you need to see to appreciate, and we did, in glimpses. It fed around the base of the brambles and gorse offering a few full-bodied views, but most sightings were only part views. Lunch time approached and, with Cley just down the road, we headed to the café.

We had as social a lunch as we could, spread out over four tables but with great views over the Cley scrapes. A few waders and gulls were dotted about that we could see from a distance and we managed to locate some Curlew Sandpipers. After finishing up we headed down to the hide to get a better look at the sandpipers and found six feeding with Dunlin and Ringed Plover. Snipe, Ruff and Black-tailed Godwits were also present giving some good wader variety. We took stroll up the East bank for Bearded Tits and Otters but they proved elusive though we did have some nice views of several Marsh Harriers.

Our final stop of the weekend would be RSPB Titchwell. Only 10 minutes from the hotel it is the perfect place to end our weekend with a short journey back. Where we failed to see the Bearded Tits at Cley, we got lucky with a handful at Island Hide. As they pinged and bounced among the reeds, we were able to familiarise ourselves with the sight and sound of these reedbed specialists. A scan of the scrapes from the bank found some lingering Avocet and Little Ringed Plover but nothing too different from what we'd seen at Cley. As we started to make our way back, some movement in the reeds where had the Bearded Tits earlier drew our attention. A few Reed Buntings and Reed Warblers made their way into the open. Not what we were hoping for, but it made us stop and look... and that meant we were in the exact right place at the exact right time for what happened next. On the far side of the channel some more movement, but this time on the waters edge and much bigger than a warblers, tits or buntings. BITTERN. Perfectly illuminated in the evening sun, edging slowly forwards looking for fish. Just as everyone had got on it and was settling in to enjoy it, a low flying harrier buzzed the channel and it crept back into cover. We waited to see if it would return but we all agreed that our views couldn't have been better so what a fantastic way to end our time in Norfolk.

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; c = approximate count; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September	
			5	6
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		2
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1
3	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		1
4	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	1	
5	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	1	
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	110+	
7	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1
8	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓
9	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	10	
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	1
12	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platelea leucorodia</i>	6	
13	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	5	
14	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		38
15	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓
16	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓
17	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	3	
18	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>	40	
19	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓
20	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	50	4
21	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	4	8
22	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	30	14
23	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓
24	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		12
25	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	10	
26	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		1
27	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	3	
28	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	9	2
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	1
30	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	11	1
31	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	3	3
32	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	12	1
33	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	
34	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>	1	6
35	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓
36	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		2
37	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓
39	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	4,000+	
40	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		14
41	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	25	
42	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	20	
43	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	100+	
44	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		2
45	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	6	3
46	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	2	4
47	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa laponica</i>	300	

	Common name	Scientific name	September	
			5	6
48	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	21	2
49	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	340	6
50	Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	1	
51	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	6	
52	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	200	34
53	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1
54	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	3	
55	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	1	
56	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	10	2
57	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	30,000+	
58	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	120	
59	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	2,000+	40
60	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>		7
61	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	10	8
62	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		7
63	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		1
64	Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudis</i>		3
65	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	10	
66	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	7	
67	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓
68	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>	10	
69	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1	
70	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓
71	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		50+
72	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	1	1
73	Rock/Feral Dove	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓
74	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	3	
75	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓
76	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓
77	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	1	
78	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	1	
79	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	1	
80	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	2	1
81	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	80	
82	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	4	
83	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	20+	
84	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓
85	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓
86	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓
87	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓
88	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1
89	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		13
90	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	
91	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		
92	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Curruca curruca</i>	2	
93	Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>	3	
94	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		4
95	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	4	
96	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	14	
97	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	
98	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	10+	

	Common name	Scientific name	September	
			5	6
99	Bearded Tit	<i>Panarus biarmicus</i>		6
100	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	3	
101	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓
102	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓
103	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	✓	✓
104	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓
105	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓
106	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓
107	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓
108	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓
109	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	3	
110	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		2
111	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	4	
112	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓
113	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	110	
114	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓

Mammals

Grey Squirrel - *Sciurus carolinensis*

Rabbit - *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Hare - *Lepus europaeus*

Muntjac - *Muntiacus reevesi*

Roe Deer – *Capreolus capreolus*