

Suffolk in Early Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 12 March 2017

Report compiled by Cliff Waller



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Tour participants: Cliff Waller (leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Friday 10th March

Thorpeness Marshes, Sizewell, Dunwich Beach, Dingle and Minsmere

As no one arrived by train at Saxmundham station, I headed off to the Wentworth Hotel in Aldeburgh, where apart from some late arrivals who joined us later, most of the group were more or less ready to depart on our first excursion.

Driving only a short distance, we stopped to look over the Thorpeness marshes near the newly erected viewing platform, where we saw our first Little Egret and several species of duck, including Shelduck, Wigeon, Gadwall, Pintail, Shoveler and Teal, along with a few common wader species including Black-tailed Godwit; we also watched a displaying Stonechat. Further along, we stopped near the old Environment Agency store to look for geese, eventually locating a distant flock of around 40 White-fronted, as well as a few Greylag, Canada and Barnacle Geese.

We then had a brief stop at Thorpeness Mere, which was busy and much disturbed but provided us with our first Egyptian Geese together with a few other common species such as Coot and Moorhen. We then continued to Sizewell beach, where a good number of newly arrived Kittiwakes were back on their nesting ledges, along with a large number of Cormorants. The highlight, though, was a perched Peregrine sitting on the corner of the old Sizewell A Power Station.

Our next point of call was Dunwich beach where a number of sea duck had been recently present, but it was disappointing as we only found a single Common Scoter fairly close inshore, but with the considerable wave action, a little patience was required even to get good view of this.

We then followed out along a private vehicle track towards Dingle Hill, to a viewpoint looking out over both Westwood Marsh and Dingle Marshes. We found several new species, the best of which were two Great White Egrets, the first of which took quite a while before it revealed its head for us above the reeds. We also had four Bewick's Swans flying in, while amongst other new species were Marsh Harrier, Lapwing and a close Long-tailed Tit.

A very brief detour to visit to the Blyth Estuary provided us with Redshank, Curlew, Oystercatcher and Avocet.

We then drove the short distance to Minsmere to visit the Island Mere Hide, where on getting out of the vehicle a very obliging and showy Goldcrest was found. Walking out towards the Island Mere Hide, in the hope of seeing Otters or Bitterns, we met a returning birder who informed us there was little to see as four Goosander had just flown off; however, continuing undaunted, we were rewarded with Bittern. At first it was difficult for the group to pick out in the reed edge, but eventually walked out close to the hide, providing us with prolonged close views and some excellent photographs. Another highlight was a superb male Sparrowhawk which came and sat on a heap of dead reed right in front of us. We also saw Marsh Harrier, Buzzard and our first Great Crested Grebe, and we heard both Water Rail and Cetti's Warbler. There had not been any murmurations of Starlings here recently, so we were pleased to see a small flock perform well for us.

Day 2

Saturday 11th March

Minsmere, Iken and Hollesley

Our main objective on this morning was to visit the scrape area at Minsmere, although, we stopped briefly at both Snape and Thorpeness again without adding anything new.

On the road through to East Bridge we stopped where I had seen some Brambling recently in an area of flattened maize. However, the sweetcorn they were feeding in had been swiped off, although we did get good views of several Reed Bunting here, including some nice males.

On reaching Minsmere, we paused briefly on the way in to view our first Coal and Marsh Tits on the feeders. After going through the usual entrance formalities, we walked out to the North Hide overlooking the scrape, where we were able to watch a number of Snipe, well hidden in the vegetation; there were also some Avocets displaying and we saw several species of duck and some Black-tailed Godwit.

Following the path out to the shore, we got good views of a female Bullfinch along the way, but little was found on the sea. We walked along the shore to East Hide, where we eventually found the pair of Smew, the male being a very handsome individual. Seven adult Mediterranean Gulls were also present, mainly already in their fine summer plumage, expected ducks and waders seen included Pintail, Redshank, a good number of Avocet, and our first Turnstone and Dunlin.

Continuing to the sluice, we saw a Common Seal and several Great-crested Grebe on the sea and two Red-throated Diver flew north, but not everyone saw them before they turned seaward and disappeared into the mist. Nothing new was seen as we walked along west side of the scrape, but on reaching West Hide we found the pair of Smew had moved, providing us with close views and great photographic opportunities.

Just before reaching the path to the Bittern Hide, we got good views of three Treecreepers, which were shortly joined by an obliging flock of Siskin.

On reaching the Bittern Hide we found it very busy, the fine weather having encouraged more visitors to Minsmere than normal at this time of year. Little new was seen here, but several Marsh Harriers entertained us and a distant Bittern flew a considerable distance over the reedbed, but was difficult for some of the group to pick out. A Cetti's Warbler frequently called from just below the hide, but we were unable to find it. Due to both time and increasing numbers of visitors arriving, we adjourned to the Minsmere café for lunch.

We then drove on to Westleton Heath NNR to search for Dartford Warbler and Woodlark, although both species proved elusive. We eventually we found three Dartford Warblers, which showed well, often in the company of some Stonechat. The Woodlark however failed to appear.

Driving south, we headed for Iken to search for a Cattle Egret which we found at Hill Farm, getting excellent views as it walked amongst the cattle.

At Hollesley, we drove into the village to search for some Waxwing reported the day before, but not knowing the site, we failed to find them. We then moved to the RSPB reserve, where we found a number of White-

fronted Geese and a Stock Dove from near the car park. Walking out to the viewing platform, we found many of the species seen over the last two days and most of us got good views of a Cetti's Warbler along the nearby fence line.

Following along the track to the grazed grassland, we found our first Ruff, but not the expected Brent Geese. Continuing out to the river wall which overlooks Orfordness shingle spit, we saw large numbers of Cormorant flying in to roost and also located a fine Short-eared Owl, our final new bird for the day.

We arrived back at the Wentworth Hotel just after 6pm, which allowed plenty of time for the group to prepare for the bird log at 7.30, after which we enjoyed a delightful dinner.

Day 3

Sunday 12th March

Walberswick, Blyth Estuary, Lowestoft and Dunwich

A slightly later 9am start allowed for loading luggage and paying our dues before we headed off north again. Our main objective of the morning was a visit to a closed area on the Walberswick National Nature Reserve, to search for Bearded Reedling (Tit) and with rain forecast, we headed straight there, apart for a brief stop for a Muntjac deer.

On reaching Walberswick, the gate locks had been recently changed so we had to walk the short distance down to the reed bed. Walking out on the bund, through the vast expanse of reed, we were soon fortunate enough to locate a Bearded Reedling as it flew across a small gap in the reed. Soon we saw at least four birds, with some of the males eventually providing us with excellent views of this very attractive species. Other species included brief flight views of a Water Rail and the usual Marsh Harriers. Walking back up the slope, we found another Goldcrest, while near the gate five Redpoll were briefly seen.

Once back at the vehicle, we stopped in the Westwood Lodge car park to try for Woodlark, but without success, although just along the track we encountered our only Redwings of the weekend.

Driving the short distance to Blythburgh, we parked at the White Hart pub car park to look over the Blyth Estuary, but the tide was in and most of the birds were very distant. However, we did see a few waders including Avocet and Black-tailed Godwit, as well as a good number of Common Gulls.

We then drove to Ness Point at Lowestoft, Britain's most easterly point, but found the on arrival that it was high tide, and not ideal for birds. We did see several Turnstones. Driving back through the town to avoid some time-consuming road works, we visited Oulton Broad to look for a Slavonian Grebe, but the fine weather had brought out huge numbers of sailors and surf boarders, creating lots of disturbance. We eventually located the grebe in the distance, as it had moved up into the river to get out of the way.

Heading back towards Aldeburgh, we dropped off one of the group to collect his car in Westleton village, as he had a long drive back up north. The rest of us made a return visit to Westleton Heath, again failing to find any Woodlark, but a slight detour to Mount Pleasant did provide us with our final new bird: two Mistle Thrushes. Our last birding stop was at Dunwich beach, where we saw thirty-eight, distant Common Scoter, but found nothing new.

We then drove to the hotel in Aldeburgh where, after the usual farewells, the remainder of the group headed off by road to their various destinations, although several detoured to see some Waxwing at Hollesley, for which we now had a detailed site. This was a good ending a very pleasant weekend for which, apart from the cold wind, the weather had been kind to us.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March		
			10	11	12
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	2	2	
2	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>			!
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	5	2	1
4	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		2	
5	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	100+	200c	1
6	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	1	1	
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	2	
8	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		1	
9	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	6	7	3
10	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	2		
11	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	12	10	2
12	Tundra Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>	4		
13	Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>			1
14	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		2	
15	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	100+	100+	!
16	White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	40c	50+	
17	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	10	20c	
18	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	8		
19	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	7	
20	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	2	3	
21	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	20+	80+	100c
22	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	15	6	
23	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	20+	30c	
24	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	8	15	8
25	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	12	40+	20+
26	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	30+	30+	20c
27	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	9	8	10
28	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	1		38
29	Smew	<i>Mergus albellus</i>		2	
30	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	4	5	3
31	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1	
32	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1	
33	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	1	5
34	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2	1
35	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1		
36	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	50+	14	6
37	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	12	4	5
38	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		h	1
39	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	5	8	1
40	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	10	7	6
41	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	6	8	6
42	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	10	30+	6
43	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	20+	10	15
44	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		1	
45	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	5	30+	20c
46	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1	20c	
47	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	8	10	8

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March		
			10	11	12
48	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		12	
49	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		12	8
50	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	30c	80+	20c
51	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		7	
52	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		1	120+
53	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	20+	15	10
54	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	8	10	4
55	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	5	2	1
56	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	150+		
57	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	6	20c	8
58	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>			3
59	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	1	2	2
60	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	1	8	3
61	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>		!	
62	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	5	4	2
63	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	2	2	
64	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	5	20c	2
65	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	2	1
66	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	3	8	3
67	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2	8	2
68	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	2	7	1
69	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	3	10	5
70	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		15	
71	Redwing	<i>Turdus illiacus</i>			5
72	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		2	1
73	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			2
74	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		3	
75	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	2+4h	
76	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	1		1
77	Bearded Reedling (Tit)	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			4
78	Marsh Tit	<i>Parus montanus</i>		1	
79	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	3	10	
80	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	3	10	6
81	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		2	
82	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	1	3	
83	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		3	
84	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	150+	30c	6
85	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	3	5	2
86	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	50+	7	20c
87	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	20c	15	10
88	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	18	20c	8
89	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		12	10
90	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	3	15	4
91	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		1	
92	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		12	
93	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1	2
94	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			2
95	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			8
96	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			5
97	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		1	1
98	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	2	10	

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March		
			10	11	12

Mammals

1	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		4	
2	Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>			1
3	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	1	5	3
4	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	2	10	12
5	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>		1	
6	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		1	