

Suffolk in Early Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 – 10 March 2019

Report compiled by Toby Collett



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Tour participants: Toby Collett (leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Friday 8th March

RSPB North Warren, Thorpeness Mere, Sizewell Beach, RSPB Minsmere

After picking up a couple of the party from Saxmundham station, we had a nice chat and drive to meet the others gathered at the Wentworth Hotel. Its beachside location in Aldeburgh is a perfect place to start, with our first destination less than five minutes' drive away.

RSPB North Warren is often overshadowed by big brother Minsmere just up the road but it really shouldn't be. The marshes were absolutely heaving with wildfowl as we arrived at the elevated viewing screen. Ducks were abundant in both species and number with Teal, Wigeon, Gadwall, Mallard, Shoveler, Shelduck and the always elegant Pintail. Three Great Egrets waded close by with over 20 Little Egrets dotted around the fringes and double figures of Grey Heron. We moved a few hundred metres down the road towards Thorpeness where we counted 130 Eurasian Greater White-fronted Geese with a handful of Barnacle Geese in the mix. A big group of Lapwing were feeding on the grassland with a lone Curlew among them.

We moved over to Thorpeness Mere for cake, coffee and Goosanders. While the group had luck with the first two, we were struggling with the latter. The mere often holds over a dozen Goosander but on this day we only managed to pick out two. Several Pochard and Tufted Duck were also present while a pair of Egyptian Geese hung around with the Mute Swans next to the boats.

Our penultimate stop would be Sizewell beach to check the water outlet towers. This is where hot water from the power plant is pumped back into the sea and attracts loads of gulls at this time of year. We had a good scan through but couldn't find any of the scarcer gulls among the expected Herring, Great and Lesser Black-backed. Several hundred Kittiwakes and Cormorants lined the platforms, gearing up for the breeding season. Marsh Tits were calling in the woodlands behind us with flocks of Goldfinch and Greenfinch in the tree tops. We had no luck with the hoped for Peregrine so headed to Minsmere and Island Mere hide to end our day.

We were greeted by a booming Bittern in the reeds to our right before entering the hide and settling down to scan. Having been acutely tuned in to looking for then earlier, the first thing Toby picked out were 15 Goosanders. Little Grebes and more ducks were dotted around the mere but what really caught their eye, after a while, were two well camouflaged Snipe below us. The team had cut the vegetation in front of the hide making it perfect for them to be seen but also ideal for them to hide away. We got the scope on them both to really appreciate their cryptic and intricate plumage. All the while we had been in the hide, Marsh Harriers had been quartering around us. We counted over six in the air at once and got very lucky seeing several males displaying. We left the hide as dusk drew in, and a couple of Bearded Tits 'pinged' away just as we opened the door and Reed Buntings flicked away in front, escorting us down the ramp.

We headed back to the hotel amazed at how much we'd managed to squeeze into an afternoon and looking forward to supper. The food was excellent, in stark contrast to the weather forecast for the next day. With several itineraries planned to try and cover every eventuality we retired for the night to prepare for the day ahead.

Day 2

Saturday 9th March

Minsmere, Bawdsey, Blythburgh Estuary, Dunwich, Westleton Heath, Minsmere

With Minsmere being so close it made sense to squeeze as much from the reserve as possible so a pre-breakfast trip was on the cards. We gathered before dawn and headed up, hoping for something a little different to yesterday. We spent some time near the cottages hoping to pick out the reported Firecrest, but only came away with Goldcrest and Great Spotted Woodpecker. A quick 30 minutes at Island Mere hide gave up Water Rail as the only addition to what we had the previous day but some Siskin on the way back kept the tally rolling over.

Breakfast was interspersed with frequent weather checks and we ended up on itinerary C. This would mean abandoning the RSPB Marshes of Hollesley and Boyton after a walk along the beach at Bawdsey looking for Shorelark. While the Shorelark didn't show we enjoyed several Stonechat and some flyby Brent Geese before the wind really picked up. With downpours forecast, we dived into the van and headed North up to Blythburgh. Taking the scenic route to the estuary, we arrived at our coffee stop to warm up only to be informed of a power cut. A quick march down to the hide gave us some nice views of Redshank, Curlew and Oystercatcher. We cut our losses and headed back during a short rainless window.

With power still not back on at our coffee stop, it was up the National Trust coastguard cottages at Dunwich for lunch, where we enjoyed wonderful views from high up the cliff tops over the sea to our east and Minsmere to the south. The squally weather had brought some Sand Martins down low over the car park and mid-way through a delicious slab of coffee cake a House Martin, the earliest one any of the group had seen, drifted past the window. With the weather clearing we had a quick look for Dartford Warbler but only got some back-end views as one darted away into the heather. We popped down over to Westleton Heath to try our luck there but drew a Dartford blank once more. The compensation was more than adequate though as a ring-tailed Hen Harrier drifted low over the heath and some errant dogwalkers flushed a Woodcock from cover. While it was dry, the weather was still pretty blustery which was why our other target of Woodlark was tricky to come by.

We would be spending the rest of the day at Minsmere, pitching ourselves close to the hides just in case the drizzle worsened. Our first stop was North Scrape to look for the drake Smew, a new bird for many of the group. It took a while but it eventually showed itself alongside two redheads. What an absolute belter of a bird. A Cetti's Warbler burst into song behind us as we scanned the scrapes. Avocets were abundant with small groups of Redshank gathered on the islands. A couple of Snipe were in close as were some Black-tailed Godwits feeding on the cut areas in front of the hide. We headed to the Bittern Hide for dusk, stopping via the centre to catch up with a couple of Marsh Tits on the feeders. A late stay can often be rewarded with a Starling murmuration or Otter sighting but we had none of the latter and only a few hundred of the former. It was great to watch the Marsh Harriers come into roost and as the light fell we all felt very lucky to have the hide, and seemingly the reserve, to ourselves.

It was time to head back to the hotel and after the amazing food last night we were all looking forward to what the menu would hold tonight. Like yesterday, frantic weather checks were the priority as the forecast wasn't great once more. There was still plenty of Minsmere to go at and with the hides being close we would be heading back again tomorrow. With the log done and the days sightings tallied it was off to bed with crossed fingers for a drier day to finish our weekend on.

Day 3

Sunday 10th March

Minsmere

A very tame Muntjac deer kept some of the party back at the centre while others carried onto the hide. The handful that went first were rewarded with a Bittern that the deer watchers missed out on.

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 Tit 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, although 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 detailed directions. 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		
			8	9	10
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	3	1	1
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	80+	1	✓
3	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1	1
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	9	1	1
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	20+	4	2
6	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	3		
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			1
9	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		7	
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓
11	White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	c140		
12	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓
13	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	3		2
14	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	4	14+	8
15	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	2		
16	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	40	8	20+
17	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	100+	30+	40
18	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	15	6	10+
19	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓
20	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	20		
21	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	20+	✓	✓
22	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		4	1
23	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		6	
24	Smew	<i>Mergus albellus</i>		3	
25	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	15		
26	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	6+	5+	5+
27	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1	
28	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1	
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	4	2
30	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1	
31	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	
32	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
33	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2	
34	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		h	h
35	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓
36	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓
37	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		20	5
38	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		100+	10
39	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	40+	40+	
40	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		1	2
41	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		2	4
42	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		10	10
43	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1	30+	2
44	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		40+	2
45	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>		1	
46	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	2	3	3
47	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			2

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March		
			8	9	10
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
49	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		h	100+
50	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓
51	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
52	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓
53	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓
54	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	200+		
55	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
56	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓
57	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		4	2
58	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓
59	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1		
60	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		h	
61	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		h	
62	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	2	h	
63	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		5	
64	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		4	
65	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	✓	
66	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	h	3	✓
67	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	h	✓	✓
68	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		2	
69	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	✓	✓
70	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		60+	40
71	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		h	
72	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	h	h	h
73	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		1	
74	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h	h
75	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		1	
76	Bearded Reedling (Tit)	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	2	h	
77	Marsh Tit	<i>Parus montanus</i>		2	2
78	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
79	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
80	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>		h	2
81	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	3	8	
82	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		1	
83	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	h	1	2
84	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			1
85	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	100+	200+	60
86	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1	
87	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓
88	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
89	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
90	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
91	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	h		
92	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	h	✓	✓
93	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		8	
94	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	3	4	
95	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	12	4	1
96	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	h		
97	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		1	h

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March		
			8	9	10

Mammals

1	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	3	4	✓
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		2	
3	Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>	3	5	
4	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
5	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓
6	Brown Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>		2	

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