

# The Best of Sussex in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

15th – 18th February 2022

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Short-eared Owl by Nick Bond

Tour report by Nick Bond

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Tour Participants: Nick Bond (Leader) with five Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

## Tuesday 15th February

After meeting my guests at our perfectly situated hotel in the heart of West Sussex, we headed out for our first trip to spend the remaining daylight hours alongside the River Arun in the picturesque historic town of Arundel. As we approached the site, we spied a stunning pair of Mandarin Duck that were alongside the mill stream.

By the river, we scanned the meadows and the landscape and soon found a female Marsh Harrier perched offering good scope views to the group. We were lucky to see a further five birds throughout our stay coming into roost giving good flight views including a male bird. A Common Buzzard circled above on several occasions and a Water Rail and Cetti's Warbler could be heard nearby. Other birds heard were the continuous songs of the Song Thrush and Robins and a nearby calling Chaffinch. The birds continued to fly-by with six Cattle Egrets flying close-by down-river, a couple of Snipe were high up. A single Redwing on the tree-tops enabled the group scope views as did a single Grey Heron already on its nest ready for the spring season ahead. As the light faded, groups of Pied Wagtails could be seen and heard overhead as they headed to their roost.

A good introduction to the trip, we headed back to the hotel to be treated to a fantastic three-course meal and a good night's sleep to prepare for the day ahead.

## Day 2

## Wednesday 16th February

A bright but blustery start of the day saw us leave our hotel and take the roads south to spend the day around the Selsey peninsula. We made our first stop to the Pagham Harbour reserve's visitor centre where we were able to observe the feeding station here with a nice group of Long-tailed Tits and a couple of Greenfinch showing well. We took the short walk down to the Ferry Pool and spent some time sheltering from the wind observing the pool. We managed to find a couple of Avocet at the back of the pool and some Black-tailed Godwits. Winter duck were also on show with Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler and a few Gadwall all showing off their colours in the mornings sunshine. A few Curlew were seen in the surrounding fields and we sat and enjoyed Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwits and Curlew take to the sky and fly around for a while before settling back down onto the pool. The channel behind the hide produced a few feeding Redshank and Teal, a party of Goldfinch were in a tree nearby. A Meadow Pipit flew over and a Chiffchaff was heard calling behind us.

We then drove down to Selsey Bill where we sheltered behind the sea wall to search the seas. We were rewarded for our efforts with at least a dozen Sandwich Terns observed battling into the strong winds and we discussed whether these birds could be early migrants or birds that have over-wintered in the nearby Chichester harbour. A Mediterranean Gull gave us a fly-by and a very tame Turnstone delighted the group as it appeared on the beach right next us.

We enjoyed the wildness of the high seas which made scanning for any seabirds difficult and the morning's sun gave way to cloud cover so we headed to a nearby supermarket to pick up lunch provisions and a well earned coffee break. A hunting Kestrel surprised us in the supermarket car park and kept us entertained as we had refreshments.

The excellent Church Norton was our next destination, and with the tide beginning to drop, there was a lot of activity in the harbour. Waders on show included large numbers of Grey Plovers, complimented by Dunlin, Redshank, Knot and a single Ringed Plover enabling the group to get good comparison views. Our first group of Brent Geese of the trip were seen as well as two Little Egrets, five Red-breasted Mergansers, Shelduck, Pintail and two Great-crested Grebes on the water. We walked up to the beach and enjoyed very close views of a confiding Curlew that posed for the photographers amongst us, we again managed to see some Sandwich Terns offshore but little else was on offer, so we concentrated our efforts back in the harbour. The birds in the harbour appeared agitated and a male Sparrowhawk duly made its way low over the water and away, but the birds in the harbour remained very unsettled and my suspicions were confirmed when a Peregrine Falcon headed low over the harbour, then perching on one of the islands giving fantastic views. This also provided the spectacle of large groups of waders flying around the harbour, a group of distant Golden Plover and Lapwing wheeled around, the wintering Whimbrel made a flying appearance. We retired to the tranquillity of the churchyard to eat our picnic lunch enabling some of the group to enjoy St. Wilfred's which is a thirteenth century chancel of a large Norman Church.

We drove the short distance to Fishbourne Creek which sits on the west side of the peninsular. By now the wind strength had increased further, making scanning difficult but we managed to pick out a single Greenshank and Spotted Redshank on the mudflats. Again the group enjoyed scanning through the large groups of birds on offer here, where Wigeon, Black-tailed Godwits and Redshank featured heavily. Our last stop the day was to have a quick check on Appledram churchyard only finding some nice Stock Doves here which sat out in the open next to Wood Pigeons again allowing the group to study the identification features. We returned to the hotel to enjoy some fine dining in the hotel's farm restaurant before heading for a comfortable night's sleep.

## Day 3

Thursday 17th February

The sun was out to greet us again this morning and after a hearty breakfast we left the hotel to head to the West Sussex heathlands in the Ambersham area. Arriving on site, Coal Tits let their presence be known calling loudly in the top of the pine trees and a distant Woodlark could be heard. Our stop and listen technique were rewarded with calling Siskins nearby and a Common Buzzard could be seen circling. Our quarry here was the elusive Dartford Warbler, and with a bit of patience and searching we found a pair of Stonechats and with them some of the group caught glimpses of a Dartford Warbler but this one did not want to reveal himself easily. As we tracked around the common, we would be followed by the fluty sound of the Woodlark calls and song. It was here that we encountered our first Roe Deer of the day which sat for a while watching us and looked just as interested in us as we were with them. Dartford Warblers eventually gave themselves up, giving all group members excellent views, accompanied yet again by the Stonechats which gave us something to look at when the warblers disappeared. Happy with our success here, we headed south to West Dean Woods.

Upon approaching the woods, we were hit with an unexpected diversion with a road closure but soon found our destination and proceeded our walk. We scanned the clearings from various vantage points, and we rewarded with a great display of resident birds of prey including good number of Red Kites and Common Buzzards, but best of all was a pair of Goshawks that appeared from a nearby spruce woodland. They appeared to be attempting to display as the male pursued the female, but she was not interested and ended up with a chase instead and the birds flew away and out of view. The female did show again a little later, giving more prolonged and closer views. A pair of Ravens were also around and their calls could be heard distantly. We checked for

finches and checking the Chaffinch flock we discovered several Brambling which showed excellently, as did a Great-spotted Woodpecker. As we approached lunch, we checked out a more sheltered spot and a Bullfinch called several times and delighted the group as did a mixed flock of Fieldfare and Redwings.

After a great morning with so many good birds seen, we reluctantly left the woodland and made our way to a nearby country pub to enjoy a nice hot lunch to fuel us for the rest of the day, catching views of Red-legged Partridges and more Red Kites on the diverted roads.

After lunch we continued south to our final destination of the day, Thorney Island. Parking up, we walked out on the east side of the island and with the winter sun behind us, we could view the main channel and mudflats. Red-breasted Mergansers were on the water and several Great-crested Grebes. Oystercatchers, Black-tailed Godwits and Redshanks were seen, and we had some fantastic fly-bys on the sea wall of five Mute Swans, twenty-four Brent Geese and a nice tight flock of Avocet. Mediterranean Gulls were seen and heard with some group members familiarising themselves with the call. A distant Barn Owl was spied towards the access gates, which gave us hope for further sightings. A bird of prey was picked up low over the saltmarsh, a female Merlin flew into view and perched up on one of the landing lights allowing the group to enjoy good scope views of this small falcon. More excitement prevailed with a distant Short-eared Owl hunting out towards the road and we soon established as a group we were watching two birds. One of these birds appeared later on the ground and posed nicely not too far out and remained here until we left. Not to feel left out, the Barn Owl hunted the reedbed area to our left, affording excellent views to all. Happy with our sightings we returned to our vehicle to head back to our hotel to rest up before another fine three-course meal and I'm sure everyone slept well after today's excitement.

## Day 4

## Friday 18th February

Our final day and with the south-east braced for red weather warnings and 'storm Eugene' about to descend on us, we had a few hours grace to head out and explore Swanbourne Lake in Arundel.

The shelter around the lake provided some ample birdwatching opportunities with many duck species allowing close inspection including a drake Mandarin Duck which welcomed us just inside the park entrance. He must have been hungry as followed us as we ventured into the park, which was somewhat quiet due to the forecast no doubt. Gadwall and Tufted Duck were around in number, and the group enjoyed sorting through the gulls on the lake and separating Herring, Black-headed and Common Gulls, whilst our one and only Lesser black-backed Gull of the trip sat nicely on a post out in the open. Shovelers and a couple of Little Grebes were further down the lake whilst woodland birds were proving tricky, we did eventually manage to find a pair of Firecrests which showed really well on and off when they finally descended from the tree tops. Marsh Tit, Goldcrest and Treecreeper were heard. We had a quick toilet stop near the castle and grabbed some provisions taking in the views of the famous Arundel Castle. Our pub lunch had cancelled on us due to the impending storm so we quickly headed up the valley to see if the wintering Bewick's Swans were around to which they were not on this occasion but we had a Kingfisher fly out in front of us and away high on the approach roads. With weather worsening, we had to cut the day short and get everyone back to the hotel safely as the storm took hold across West Sussex. We reflected on the journey back of the many great wildlife encounters we had experienced over the trip. We said our goodbyes at the hotel and made our separate journeys home.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

			February 2022			
	Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓		
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	
4	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓			✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓			✓
7	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓	✓
9	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓		✓	✓
10	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓	✓	
11	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>				✓
12	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	
13	Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>	✓			✓
14	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓		✓
15	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓	
16	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓		✓
17	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓	
18	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February 2022			
			15	16	17	18
19	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓	✓	
20	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓			✓
21	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	
22	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓			
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓		✓	✓
24	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓	
25	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			✓	
26	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓	
27	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	
28	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			✓	
29	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓		
30	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	
31	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H			
33	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓		✓
34	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓		✓
35	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	
36	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓	✓	
37	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓		✓
38	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓	✓	
39	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓		
40	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	
41	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓			
42	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓	✓	
43	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		✓		
44	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		
45	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	
46	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓		
47	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		✓		
48	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓		
49	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓		
50	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓	
51	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	
53	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February 2022			
			15	16	17	18
54	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓
55	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		✓	✓	
57	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		✓		
58	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba l. 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓		✓
60	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓
62	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			✓	
63	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			✓	
64	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				✓
65	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	H	✓	✓	
66	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	✓	H	H	
67	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	
68	Woodlark	<i>Lullua alborea</i>			✓	
69	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	
70	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>	✓		✓	
71	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>			✓	
75	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓	
77	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓		✓	
78	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	H	H	✓	H
79	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			H	
80	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H			
81	Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>			✓	
82	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H		
83	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				H
84	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>				✓
84	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	✓
85	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>				H
86	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓	
87	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	H	✓	✓	✓



	Common name	Scientific name	February 2022			
			15	16	17	18
88	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	H	✓	✓	✓
89	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				H
90	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓	H
91	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓	
96	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	
98	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			✓	
100	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓	
101	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			✓	
102	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓
103	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓	
104	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓	

## Mammals

### Common name

Grey Squirrel

Rabbit

Roe Deer

Fallow Deer

### Scientific name

*Sciurus carolinensis*

*Oryctolagus cuniculus*

*Capreolus capreolus*

*Dama dama*