

# The Best of Sussex in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

6th – 10th February 2023

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Black Redstart



Spotted Redshank



Grey Wagtail



Curlew

Tour report and images by Nick Bond

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Tour Participants – Nick Bond (Leader) with four Naturetrek clients.

## Day 1

## Monday 6th February

After meeting at our perfectly situated hotel in the heart of West Sussex, we made the short journey 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 had a quick stop to check the wildfowl on Swanbourne Lake, finding good numbers of Gadwall, Tufted Duck and a single drake Pochard and Egyptian Goose.

We positioned ourselves by the river in perfect weather conditions as we scanned the meadows and the landscape and soon found a female Marsh Harrier perched offering good scope views to the group, followed by a second bird, both perched up and in the same field of view. We were lucky to see at least six of these coming in to roost this evening. A couple of Grey Herons also flew in to roost as did two small flocks of Egyptian Geese. Both Canada and Greylag Geese had been observed in the nearby fields and the group also enjoyed a Stonechat fly-catching by the riverbank and also a Great Crested Grebe on the river. As the light faded, a fantastic Barn Owl appeared above the reedbed and gave us a few close fly-bys before heading out onto the meadows to hunt. We saw the owl a few more times gliding over the meadows - a beautiful sight!

A fantastic start to the trip and we headed back to the hotel to be treated to a fantastic meal and a good night's sleep to set us up for the day ahead.

## Day 2

## Tuesday 7th February

A bright winter's morning and with the forecast looking good for the day, we left our hotel and hit the road to spend the day around the Selsey peninsula, mainly concentrating our efforts on the wonderful Pagham Harbour. We made our first stop at Siddlesham Ferry Pool, the hide here providing a good vantage point to observe the birds on offer. A pair of Avocet were asleep in the centre of the pool, but water levels were high so it was no surprise that just a couple of Redshank and a single Black-tailed Godwit were the only waders present. Winter duck were also on show with Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler and a few Gadwall and Shelduck all showing off their colours in the morning sunshine, while the feeding station behind produced some lovely Chaffinch and Greenfinch.

We quickly moved on to Church Norton and were delighted to find a Firecrest just along the path from the car park as it fed on nearby holm oaks (next to St. Wilfred's which is a thirteenth century chancel of a large Norman Church) giving the group prolonged views. The light across the harbour was stunning. One thing that was impressive here was the sheer number of birds on the ground, air and water! Searching the waders, we found impressive numbers of Grey Plover, Knot and Dunlin with a few Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher and Curlew scattered around and we also found a lone Bar-tailed Godwit. A female Goldeneye was picked out in the channel as the tide raced in. Some nice groups of Shelduck and Pintails were seen roosting on the mudflats and the sky occasionally filled with birds, mainly with large groups of Lapwing and smaller groups of Golden Plover. We walked down to the beach and scanned the sea. A pair of Pintail were seen, and we soon found one of our target species, the Slavonian Grebe! A very distant group of four birds were seen initially followed by a single bird giving the group decent scope views.

We then drove down to Selsey Bill where we basked in the winter sunshine. Conditions were a little too calm for a productive sea-watch but we were still entertained by a couple of Red-throated Divers flying west offshore whilst a winter-plumaged Sandwich Tern was on a groyne post.

We headed to a nearby supermarket to pick up lunch provisions and refreshments before heading to Selsey west beach. Shortly after parking up, we clapped eyes on a female Black Redstart at the caravan parks disused go-kart track, camouflaged against the old tyres around the track. The footpath from here took us down to the beach and through the caravan park and onto the breach of the Medmerry reserve, finding Stonechat and Meadow Pipits en-route. The breach made a good lunch stop. A large flock of Dunlin were on the distant saltmarsh before being displaced by the incoming tide revealing a couple of Grey Plover with them, while a single Turnstone kept us company on the rocks. As we departed, a splendid male Black Redstart was found, feeding around the nearby rocks.

We drove to our final destination of the day to explore the east side of Pagham Harbour. Walking out to the harbour mouth, we stopped to enjoy the spectacle of the large groups of birds in the sky and we were treated to a large group of Brent Geese flying from the harbour to the fields behind the north wall and a Black Swan flew in with five Mute Swans. On Pagham Lagoon we found our second female Goldeneye of the day and scanning here also produced small numbers of Little and Great Crested Grebes. At the harbour entrance we were running out of daylight as we searched for the Snow Bunting that has decided to spend its winter here. We were about to give up after giving the area a good search when a single bird flushed up from the shingle giving a short trill before dropping down on the far bank. A short search commenced and there it was, sitting tight and blending well amongst the shingle before departing for the spit, no doubt to roost - a decent addition to the trip list!

We returned to the hotel to enjoy some well-deserved dinner before heading for a comfortable night's sleep.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 8th 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, we were confronted with freezing fog and temperatures of -3 degrees! Coal Tits let their presence be known, calling from the car park pine trees. The heathland was frozen and the habitat looked stunning as the sun tried in vain to burn off the mist. We took the circuit round and with some patience we glimpsed a Dartford Warbler several times, we heard a Siskin and a Green Woodpecker and a Great Spotted Woodpecker was seen and heard in nearby tree-tops. The freezing fog persisted so we cut our losses and headed south to our next destination - West Dean Woods. As we headed south over the South Downs National Park, we were greeted with sunshine again and perfect conditions to search for our target species.

As we left the bus and started our walk, the first bird we heard was Raven; two birds flew overhead and headed to a nearby sheep field, where we noticed there were at least 20 birds present, cronking away. Red Kites joined them overhead followed by Common Buzzards.

We took the woodland trail, stopping at various viewpoints. Ravens were prominent in the skies as they took to the thermals, a Mistle Thrush was seen in nearby tree tops and a lovely Marsh Tit showed well around us. We reached our lunch spot and searching the tree tops rewarded us with views of our first Hawfinch of the day, joined

briefly by a second bird before dispersing as a Red Kite moved over the area. Presumably one of the same birds showed again briefly and we hit a purple patch as we found another one on the trail back to the bus. Checking in at one of the viewpoints again, the sky was alive with birds thermaling. A female Goshawk was picked out before gaining height with a Buzzard and another Goshawk moved through the area shortly after. Happy with our sightings here we headed to the Arun valley to make the most of the beautiful weather.

Upon arriving we scanned the water meadows and found four Bewick's Swans as a Red Kite sailed over. We moved on to a nearby viewpoint and scanned the surrounding fields which contained good number of scampering Brown Hares and up to 40 Red Kites in the sky at the same time as they headed to their roost. A Marsh Harrier headed down the valley and Grey Partridge could be heard around us. We finished the day with yet another Barn Owl, this one showing at point blank range; we all stood still and silent as this beautiful creature landed in the tall grass in front of us and turned to glare at us before heading off down the valley.

We were treated to a sumptuous dinner tonight at a nearby country pub before returning to the hotel for a well-earned rest.

## Day 4

## Thursday 9th February

A murkier start today with fine rain persisting as we headed back down to Pagham Harbour, this time to check out the North Wall end of the harbour. The highlight here was a stunning male Marsh Harrier that was hunting a distant reedbed before perching allowing everyone decent scope views, while a Cetti's Warbler was calling nearby as was a Reed Bunting. Again, the experience of the number of birds was exciting as various flocks took to the sky, the sound of Lapwing and Curlew embedded in our ears as we departed.

We headed straight to Selsey Bill and initially it looked as if the murk was clearing. We managed to spy a Great Northern Diver on the flat calm sea before the visibility decreased again making viewing conditions difficult.

We then parked at the Pagham Harbour visitor centre where the feeding stations provided good views of Long-tailed Tits, House Sparrows and Goldfinches. We took the short walk to the Ferry Pool hide and were delighted to see the Avocet numbers had increased to 11 birds and this time they were actively feeding. A nice female Sparrowhawk was spied on a poolside post, some speckling to her back making her plumage interesting to look at. The nearby ferry channel allowed us to study a wintering Spotted Redshank as it fed side-by-side with a Common Redshank allowing for a great comparison.

We then headed west and just over the border into Hampshire and conditions improved as we checked out the oyster beds of Hayling Island. This made a good lunch stop and scanning the area a nearby island was smothered in roosting Oystercatchers, c80 birds were counted as the tide swallowed up their roost site and they departed south. We picked out four Black-necked Grebes on the water as well as Great Crested Grebes and Red-breasted Mergansers. A Mediterranean Gull flew past calling and a Greenfinch sang from bushes behind us.

We checked out the area around nearby Langston Mill pond which held several Grey Herons on their nests as well as a Little Egret perched out in the open.

Our next destination was Southmoor Local Nature reserve, where there had been an adult Sabine's Gull that had been causing a bit of interest, especially as this scarcity was rather confiding and in full breeding plumage. There was some good birding to be had as we waited for the Sabine's Gull to appear, the nearby harbour waters producing displaying Red-breasted Mergansers and Goldeneye. Two Long-tailed Ducks were a little trickier as they were typically always diving. Greenshank could be heard from the saltmarsh but frustratingly remained out of view, while several Rock Pipits were enjoyed along the beach. The Sabine's Gull eventually gave itself up and showed well mainly roosting upon a small island - a very smart gull indeed and worth the wait for the group (unknown to us at the time but the bird had moved on since, with this being its last day at Southmoor)!

With all that excitement we hopped back over the border and finished the day on the east side of Thorney Island exploring the area of the great deeps. There were plenty of waders and gulls to sort through in the harbour and salt marsh, while a perched Marsh Harrier was found followed by a distant Merlin that took some scrutiny. A second Marsh Harrier appeared and both birds departed low to the south. The occasional 'meow' call of the Mediterranean Gull could be heard, and we were again treated to the sky alive with Lapwing, Golden Plover and Brent Geese.

We headed back to the hotel, where we had dinner and a wholesome winter berry crumble on our final night!

## Day 5

## Friday 10th February

A return to fine winter sunshine for our final day and this time we were going to concentrate our efforts around Arundel and the nearby Arun Valley and South Downs. The day got off to a good start with a nice Peregrine Falcon perched up on the picturesque Arundel Castle and moving on to the mill stream we observed a pair of Egyptian Geese, whilst a Little Egret was feeding in the freshly created ditch. A pair of Mistle Thrushes quickly melted away in the tree-tops and a stunning Grey Wagtail was seen feeding around the old water mill.

We took a leisurely stroll around Swanbourne Lake, observing the resident duck species including excellent numbers of Gadwall, with odd groups of Shoveler and Teal noted further around the lake. We studied a pair of Goldcrests which gave themselves up eventually, as did a male Firecrest that was singing to us from a roadside tree. A Treecreeper gleamed as it hugged the trunk of the tree it was feeding on. Returning to the bus, four Cattle Egrets were spied out on the meadows, our first of the trip.

Before leaving Arundel we grabbed some lunch provisions and headed to the downs above. We were fortunate to clap eyes in better light on the four Bewick's Swans which were joined by a single Cattle Egret, and this proved a lovely viewpoint at which to have lunch in the winter sunshine. We had a quick look at the nearby water treatment works and were delighted to see a few Chiffchaffs hunting insects, whilst another Grey Wagtail dropped in on the filter bed. It was time for our final jaunt of the trip and headed onto the downs. A pair of Grey Partridge were flushed and seen, occasionally seeing the heads of this wary species popping up in the foliage, a flock of Linnet flew over and it was pleasant to hear a Skylark in full song. Red Kites were abundant again, with the odd Common Buzzard and Kestrel around and in nearby scrub we could hear the call of Bullfinch but these refused to give themselves up. Brown Hares were around in numbers in the surrounding fields and having walked out to the area over-looking the dew pond, it was soon time to retreat to the bus and sadly conclude the tour. It was only a short trip back to the hotel to say our goodbyes and reflect on the many highlights we had encountered on this trip.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	February 2023				
		6	7	8	9	10
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓			
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>				✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓		✓	✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓		✓	
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritis</i>		✓			
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>				✓	
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>					✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓		✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>			✓		✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓		✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓		✓	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>	✓		✓		✓
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓		✓	
Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓		✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	H	✓		✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	February 2023				
		6	7	8	9	10
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓		✓	
Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓		✓	✓
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓				
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓			✓	✓
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				✓	
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓		✓	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓		✓	
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓	
Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			✓		
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓		✓
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				✓	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					✓
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓		H
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>			H		✓
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		✓	
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓		✓	
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓		✓	
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓		✓	
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓		✓	
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓		✓	
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓		✓	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓		✓	
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓			
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		✓	H
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		✓	
Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				H	
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>				✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓			
Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓			
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓		✓	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		✓	✓
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>				✓	
Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>				✓	
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		✓		✓	
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia. 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>					✓
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	✓		✓		

Common name	Scientific name	February 2023				
		6	7	8	9	10
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				✓	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	H		✓	✓	H
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓	H	H	
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	H
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>		✓		✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					✓
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Restart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓			
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓			✓
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	H		✓	H	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓		✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H			H	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>			✓		
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				H	✓
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>		✓			✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			✓		
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			✓		✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				H	
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>					✓
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			H		✓
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓		H
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓		✓	✓
Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			H		
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					H
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			✓		
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberzia schoeniclus</i>				H	
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		✓			



## Mammals

<b>Common name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>