

South Devon in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 - 30 January 2020



Pied Avocets



Black-tailed Godwits



Red Crossbill



Ruddy Turnstone & Sanderling

Report & Images by Matt Collis



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Summary

This tour around South and East Devon is a fantastic opportunity to enjoy some of the best of UK winter wildlife. Exploring an array of habitat types including the vast heathlands of East Devon, the River Exe estuary, and the mosaic woodlands of the Haldon hills, this trip offers each person the chance to catch up with a diverse and exciting mix of species. During this trip we were lucky enough to enjoy sunny dry days during a year where the winter has been relatively mild. In total we managed to encounter 98 different species having some incredible encounters along the way. A notable highlight was our fantastic private boat tour which saw us get close to a huge number of waders including large numbers of Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit and Golden Plover as well as some less common species including Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot and Ringed Plover. Other notable birds from our trip included several difficult sea-based birds with close views of Red-throated Diver, Eider and Red-necked Grebe, and a few local specialties including Dartford Warbler, Common Crossbill and Cirl Bunting. The food and accommodation were fantastic and overall it was a wonderful few days birding.

Day 1

Tuesday 28th January

After picking up those travelling by train at Exeter St.Davids, the group gathered at the Royal Beacon hotel in Exmouth where we briefly checked in before heading straight out for an afternoon excursion up on to the East Devon Heaths. Our first stop was at RSPB Aylesbeare where we completed a looped walk around the reserve. Although the heathland always feels pretty quiet, with some patience you can get some great views of notoriously difficult to see birds just as we did with several brilliant encounters; our best two being close up views of a pair of Crossbills perched in a low tree and a single Dartford Warbler which showed all too briefly but just long enough for most of the group to obtain a view. Additional sightings included Fieldfare, Stonechat, Bullfinch and a Marsh Tit in amongst a flock of Long-tailed, Blue and Great Tit which was also a brilliant highlight.

For the second part of our visit to the heaths we headed down towards Woodbury Common to search for roosting raptors. After finding a good vantage point, we continued to scan the heath as dusk began to fall. Unfortunately, on this occasion we had no luck with any raptors but we did have some amazing views of a large flock of Reed Bunting coming into roost as well spotting a few other birds including Siskin, Meadow Pipit and a very brazen Dunnock. With the light all but gone we retreated to the van and headed back to the hotel for a fantastic three course meal and a more formal introduction to the area and itinerary for the rest of our trip.

Day 2

Wednesday 29th January

Rising before the sun we took an early morning walk around Exmouth harbour on the high tide in search of Black Redstart. Although we didn't spot the bird on this occasion, we did manage to see a few other species including Great Black-backed, Herring and Common Gull, flocks of Curlew and a group of Dunlin moving downriver at high tide. We also enjoyed views of a group of Turnstone looking for scraps at the docks as the cockles were being brought in.

After breakfast we made our way round the estuary to Dawlish Warren where our goal was to reach 'The Bight' to see the high tide roost. Our seawatching on route proved very productive with many Great Crested Grebe, a

lone Eider, a passing Great Northern Diver and several Red-throated Diver; including one very close giving incredible views. We also encountered several other good birds on route including a Cirl Bunting sat on top of a post, a male Sparrowhawk on top of the warden's hut and a flock of Linnet perched in the scrub. Arriving at The Bight we could immediately see a huge flock of waders assembled here; predominately Dunlin with many other species in support including Turnstone, Sanderling, Grey Plover, Knot, Curlew, Oystercatcher and Common Ringed Plover. We also spotted a mixed group of Skylark, Meadow Pipit and Linnet feeding amongst the pebbles on the sandy beach giving good comparison views.

After stopping at Dart Farms for a quick bite to eat, we headed to Topsham for our private river cruise - an incredible opportunity to get out on the estuary and see the birds at eye level and distance. With the sun shining bright, the cruise was sensational with so many birds it was hard to know where to look. One of the highlights included seeing many hundreds of Black-tailed Godwit, Avocet and Dunlin feeding right by the water's edge. A second was when the whole flock of Golden Plover took to the air, shimmering white and gold, mixed with Lapwing and the odd Godwit. We frequently had flocks of Brent Geese flyover in large skeins and had many opportunities to spot difficult species like Knot, Common Ringed Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit. Other birds of note were Red-breasted Merganser, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Common Redshank and two Black Swans (resident in the local area). Just when we thought we'd seen everything, we spotted two Goldeneye feeding just up river from the dock - difficult views but an excellent finish to a wonderful cruise.

To finish the day, we grabbed a quick hot drink before heading down to Cockwood to see if we could spot the resident Slavonian Grebe. Our luck was in and we all managed to get fantastic views as it dived in search of food not too far from the shore. Feeling lucky, we decided to make one final stop on our way back to the hotel, dropping in at Exmouth docks to see if we could spot the Red-necked Grebe which had been recently seen here with the last on in 2012. Once again our luck was in, firstly when the Black Redstart was briefly spotted but then lost from view, and secondly when we found the grebe just in the nick of time before we lost the light - a brilliant end to a fantastic day.

Day 3

Thursday 30th January

Starting with an early breakfast and checking out the hotel, we made our way back down in Exmouth Docks where we finally managed to get good views of the Black Redstart. Although still quite secretive, it did pop up giving excellent clear views on several occasions - phew! Following on from here we decided to drop in to RSPB Bowling Green Marsh to see what birds were on offer at high tide. Although most of the waders roosted on Exminster Marshes, we still had a good variety with Greenshank, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Curlew all on show. Ducks were fairly plentiful too with two Pochard, several pairs of Pintail and many Shoveler, Teal and Wigeon. A pair of Greylag were also new to our list but no sign of the Long-billed Dowitcher, which has been resident all winter, which was a shame.

From here we moved on to Exminster Marsh to view the rest of the birds in the high tide roosts and were greeted with great flocks of birds; Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Dunlin, Curlew, Knot, Golden Plover, Lapwing and most impressively one large flock of ~600 Avocets. One of the best moments was when every single bird took to the air and put on a fantastic aerial display crossing and weaving through the sky. We looked for raptors or other predator but saw nothing more than a lone perched Buzzard on this occasion.

Ducks were once again very abundant and we managed to add Tufted and Shelduck to our list for the day as well as Cetti's Warbler and Grey Wagtail which were both heard but unfortunately not seen.

Our final stop of the morning was to the Haldon Hills where we visited the Forestry Commission centre. After a warming brew and cake, we stopped to watch the feeders for a short while and enjoy the flurry of small passerines; huge numbers of Siskins with many Coal Tit, Chaffinch, Great Tit, Blue Tit and the occasional Nuthatch or Great Spotted Woodpecker. For the second part of our visit we walked one of the many trails in search of Hawfinch and other forest specialists. Unfortunately, no sign of Hawfinch but we did have several Crossbills fly over, a magnificently showy Treecreeper, a slightly more elusive Goldcrest as well as a host of other common woodland species including a large flock of Chaffinch eating Beech seeds.

We stopped for lunch along the River Teign where we enjoyed fantastic views of the river as we ate; Red-breasted Merganser, Little Egret and Oystercatcher all spotted. For our final stop of the trip we made our way to Labrador Bay in search of Cirl Buntings at this famous conservation site. Although the weather had worsened with strong winds, we got lucky and we soon found a flock of around twelve birds mixed with a few Chaffinches, Dunnocks and Robins all sheltering in one corner. After prolonged views we decided to check a few other places for birds and looked out to sea where we caught up with a few Gannets and several gulls including Herring and Great black-backed – a wonderful way to end our trip.

With the day and trip coming to an end we returned towards Exeter train station where we said our goodbyes and thanks for a thoroughly enjoyable trip. It had been a great few days with fantastic birds, wonderful weather and some superb experiences; the boat tour being the highlight for many. Rest assured everyone was going away with some wonderful nature-filled memories and with great excitement to take on another UK-based wildlife adventure. Until next time!

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January		
			28	29	30
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓	
2	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			✓
4	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓
5	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓	✓
6	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓
7	Black Swan	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>		2	
8	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓
9	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓
13	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓	✓
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			✓
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓
16	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		1	
17	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		2	
18	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓
19	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓	✓
20	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
21	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	
22	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓
23	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓
24	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>		1	
25	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓	
26	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		1	
27	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓
28	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓	✓
29	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓
30	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓	✓
31	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓	
32	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	
33	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	
34	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓	✓
35	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓	✓
36	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓	
37	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓	
38	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓	
39	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓
40	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	
41	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓
42	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
43	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus canus</i>		✓	
44	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓
45	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
46	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	
47	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		3	
48	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		1	

	Common name	Scientific name	January		
			28	29	30
49	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓
50	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	
51	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓
52	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓
53	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓
54	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓
55	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓
56	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓
57	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		H	
58	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓
59	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓
60	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
61	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
62	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
63	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓		✓
64	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
65	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
66	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	
67	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H
68	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
69	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	✓		
70	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓		✓
71	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
72	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓
73	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			✓
74	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
75	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
76	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓		
77	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓
78	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓		✓
79	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓
80	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
81	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓
82	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	
83	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓
84	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓
85	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			H
86	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓
87	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
88	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	✓		
89	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
90	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓		
91	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓	✓
92	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	
93	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	✓		✓
94	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓
95	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓		✓
96	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓	✓
97	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓		✓