

South Devon in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

26th – 28th November 2021



Avocets



Crossbill



Ruff (with Redshanks)



Snow Bunting

Report & images by Matt Collis



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Tour Participants – Matt Collis (Leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

Summary

This tour around South and East Devon is a fantastic opportunity to enjoy some of the best of UK winter wildlife as we explore the full range of habitats on and around the River Exe estuary. Our first two days were notably blighted by challenging weather thanks to Storm Arwen and no doubt limited some sightings including several key target species. Despite this, our species count reached an impressive 96 and included several local rarities including Snow Bunting and Black-necked Grebe.

The large numbers and close views of waders including Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit and Golden Plover as well as some less common species including Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot and Ruff, were highlights amongst the group. A particularly spectacular moment featuring a Peregrine hunting Black-tailed Godwit also stood out as a highlight. Other notable birds from our trip include Red-throated Diver, Common Scoter and Common Crossbill as well as an impressive range of local specialties including Black-bellied Brent Geese, Red-breasted Merganser, Rock Pipit and Cattle Egret.

Day 1

Friday 26th November

After picking up those travelling by train from Exeter St. Davids, the group gathered at the Royal Beacon hotel in Exmouth for the afternoon check in and a welcome from leader Matt. With few hours of light left in the day, we headed straight out for an afternoon excursion up on to the East Devon Heaths. We faced a rather blustery and occasionally very wet walk around RSPB Aylesbeare thank to Storm Arwen, meaning birding was very tricky and expectations were low. Despite this handicap we still managed to pick up on a several species, notably a large swirling flock of Linnet, Meadow Pipit, Mistle Thrush, Redwing and some of the most confiding Stonechats anyone had ever encountered. We searched hard for Dartford Warbler too but were limited to just a few churrs heard from within the gorse. With the weather closing in and winds increasing, we retired back to the safety of the hotel and ended our day with a lovely three course meal in the hotel restaurant.

Day 2

Saturday 27th November

Following breakfast, we headed up river to RSPB Bowling Green Marsh to spend a few hours in the hide. Not only did this provide shelter from the gusty winds of Storm Arwen, we also had an increasing number of birds, pushed in from the main river as it reached high tide. We had excellent views the entire time, notably of many species of duck including Pintail, Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Gadwall, Shoveler and Pochard. Arguably it was the waders who charmed us most; a large flock of ~500 Black-tailed Godwit with smaller numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Knot, Dunlin and a lone Ruff mixed in. We were incredibly lucky that a Peregrine paid a visit while we were here too, kicking up every single bird as it slashed through the sky in hot pursuit – spectacular.

Whilst walking into Topsham for a hot drink, we were delighted to find several large flocks of waders out on the estuary on the lowering tide. Golden Plover, Black and Bar-tailed Godwit, a good flock of Knot and several Red-breasted Merganser were the highlights. Arguably the most stunning sight was the flock of ~400 Avocet who frequently kicked up in the air in unison with some dropping in very close to us to feed.

Our final stop of the morning was at Darts Farm where we attempted to find some Brambling in amongst the finch flocks. Despite our best efforts we failed to find one but did enjoy great views of Goldfinch, Linnet, Meadow Pipit and a secret Stock Dove which was hiding in amongst a small flock of Woodpigeon.

Following our lunch, we then spent our afternoon making our way down the southern edge of the estuary, stopping in at various locations to scan both the river and neighbouring fields on route to Dawlish Warren. Greenshank, Turnstone, Little Grebe and Cattle Egret were all new additions to our list and having small flocks of Brent Geese fly directly over our heads to feed in the fields was a notably enjoyable moment too. Once at Dawlish Warren we opted to start with a short seawatch, picking up Gannet, Great Crested Grebe and a lone Common Scoter sat out on the water.

With the light fading, we finished with a short walk around the inner Warren in search of Cirl Bunting but the gusty winds left the area notably silent for small birds. A hardy Kestrel, a brief view of a Kingfisher and a small flock of Starlings coming in to roost were our last sightings of the day.

Day 3

Sunday 28th November

Starting with an early breakfast, we headed straight up to the Haldon Hills for a walk around the forest. We had a great start with fantastic views of perched Crossbill and Siskin but failed to locate any of the Hawfinch on this occasion. We stopped in at the foresty centre to check the feeders and immediately witnessed a Sparrowhawk hammer into a Coal Tit and Nuthatch! It was hard to see who was the victim but the hawk left with quarry in its talons. From here we made our way back toward Dawlish Warren via Ideford Common where a Snow Bunting had been reported. We couldn't have had better views of this stunning and unusual bird for South Devon as it fed along the path on grass seeds, coming as close as 10 metres before we chose to drop back.

Arriving at Dawlish Warren, we attempted a similar pattern as the day before but this time in glorious sunshine. Our seawatch produced more Gannets and Great Crested Grebe as well as a couple of nice looking Red-throated Divers. Despite some nice views of Rock Pipit, wintering Chiffchaff and several other small birds, we failed to locate any Cirl Bunting despite the additional eyes and ears of other birdwatchers in the area.

Following a short stop for lunch, we then headed back towards Exmouth via Exminster Marsh where the majority of the birds were sat on the estuary leaving us a nice variety of duck to look through. Cetti's Warbler was a nice addition here. Once in Exmouth, we headed into the harbour area to view the estuary at low tide where we got fantastic views of Red-breasted Merganser, Greenshank and the Brent Geese which were feeding close in front of us. A quick scan of the main estuary channel provided one of the best bonus birds of the trip, two Black-necked Grebe, a winter rarity and first record in several years for the River Exe. Although mid-distance, everyone managed to get good views through the scope and it was a lovely way to end our trip.

Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; + = approximate count; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	November 2021		
			26	27	28
1	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	
3	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
4	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓	✓
5	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓
6	Black Swan (introduced)	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>			✓
7	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓
8	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓
9	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓	
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓
12	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓	✓
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓	
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓
16	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		1	
17	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		10	
18	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			3
19	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	
20	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓	✓
21	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			2
22	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓
23	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓
24	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		1	✓
25	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓
26	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓	✓
27	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓
28	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓
30	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓
31	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓	
32	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓
33	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓
34	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓
35	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		400	
36	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓
37	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓	
38	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	November 2021		
			26	27	28
39	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓	✓
40	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓	
41	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓
42	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓
43	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1	✓
44	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		1	
45	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓	
46	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓
47	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		1	
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
49	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus canus</i>		✓	
50	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓
51	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
52	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	
53	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓	✓
54	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		1	
55	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
56	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓
57	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1	
58	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓
59	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓
60	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓
61	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓
62	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
63	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
64	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
65	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			2
66	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	H	✓	✓
67	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
68	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
69	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			✓
70	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
71	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓		✓
72	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	H		
73	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	H		✓
74	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
75	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓
76	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
77	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
78	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	♀	✓
79	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	November 2021		
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80	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓	✓
81	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
82	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓
83	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓
84	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓
85	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓
86	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
87	Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓
88	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	
89	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓
90	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	✓		✓
91	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓
92	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓
93	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			✓
94	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			H
95	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓
96	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			1

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