

South Devon in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th – 30th January 2022



Pale-bellied Brent Goose



Eurasian Spoonbill



Black Redstart



Turnstone

Tour report & images by Matt Collis



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Summary

This tour around South and East Devon was a fantastic opportunity to enjoy some of the best of UK winter wildlife, exploring a full range of habitats on and around the River Exe estuary. Our species count reached an impressive 103 species and included several local rarities including Pink-footed Goose, Eurasian Spoonbill, Pale-bellied Brent Goose, Cattle Egret, Spotted Redshank and Siberian Chiffchaff.

Arguably one of the highlights of this tour was the number and stunning views of wintering waders including large flocks of Avocet, Dunlin, Black-tailed Godwit and Golden Plover as well as smaller flocks of less common species including Bar-tailed Godwit, Knot and Greenshank. In addition to this spectacle, other notable moments from this trip featured excellent views of a male Black Redstart, two perched Peregrine Falcons at short distance and two close encounters with Eurasian Spoonbill. Other notable birds from our trip include Kingfisher, Common Scoter, Goldeneye, Brambling, Common Crossbill as well the impressive range of local specialties including Dark-bellied Brent Geese and Red-breasted Merganser.

Day 1

Friday 28th January

The group gathered at the Royal Beacon hotel in Exmouth for an early afternoon check in followed by 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 started with a stroll around RSPB Aylesbeare Common which proved quiet for birds, potentially due to the dreary and chilly conditions. Our best sighting was of a stunning Green Woodpecker as it bound across the heath and of a small flock of Redwing perched at the top of a tree. Other birds gave brief views, mostly in flight, but we picked up quite a variety of species including Lesser Redpoll, Siskin, and Linnet. We searched hard for Dartford Warbler but had no luck and so finished our evening with a short walk around Woodbury Common in the hope of bumping into some raptors on route to roost. A very large flock of Linnet (~100) and Meadow Pipit (~60) could be seen swirling, but no raptors. With daylight all but gone, we retired back to the safety of the hotel and the comfort of a lovely three course meal to end the day.

Day 2

Saturday 29th January

Our pre-breakfast stroll turned out to be a glorious one with a beautiful sunrise and fine conditions for our first look at the estuary. After picking out some of the more common species like Shag, Cormorant, Dark-bellied Brent Goose, Oystercatcher and Redshank, our efforts focused on some scarcer birds including a nice Greenshank, two Red-breasted Merganser and a Kingfisher perched on the corner of a boat. After breakfast we explored a few more areas of Exmouth beach, picking up a small mixed flock of Turnstone and Purple Sandpiper feeding on the rocky shore and finding a Little Egret feeding on the main estuary. We finished with arguably the bird of the morning, a stunning male Black Redstart, which proved elusive at first, but then perched wonderfully for us for several minutes at a time.

Just before lunch, we dropped in to RSPB Bowling Green Marsh for a quick scan which proved very fruitful with our first views of a Black-tailed Godwit feeding just a mere few metres away, some Teal, Shoveler and

Pintail, as well as a surprise pair of Egyptian Geese. Two Snipe were then spotted feeding out in the open probing the mud and just as we were about to leave, a Spoonbill suddenly flew out from a dense area of Juncus before proceeding to preen and stretch in full view – fantastic!

During lunch we managed to add Stock Dove and Kestrel to our list over some nearby farmland but then headed back into Topsham for a quick walk along the quay. Here we saw an impressive flock of Black-tailed Godwit (~800) and managed to pick out the Spotted Redshank feeding alongside the Godwits at close quarters. We also had our first views of Avocet, Golden Plover and a brief glimpse of a male Goldeneye as it flew past, settling on the river distantly upstream but a little hard to see clearly.

The remainder of our afternoon was spent at Dawlish Warren, firstly scanning the sea which revealed Common Guillemot, Common Scoter, Gannet and Great Crested Grebe but unfortunately no divers. We then walked the beach, busy with people and dogs, to view the high tide roost where a whole mix of birds had assembled. As high tide approached, we could see thousands of Dunlin and then worked our way through the smaller numbers of Grey Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit. We waited patiently in the hope of a raptor putting up the flock, but no such luck on this occasion. With the light fading, there was just enough time to stroll back through the inner warren to pick up Little Grebe, Linnet and a surprise Siberian Chiffchaff flitting in the low branches just by the path – an excellent way to end the day.

Day 3

Sunday 30th January

Our early morning walk turned out to be a bit of a write off due to intense early fog but some very close views of Turnstones sheltering against iron chains right at our feet made our efforts worth it. Following breakfast, we got off to an incredible start as we watched two Peregrine Falcons perched just a few hundred metres away and visible from the hotel! After watching them preen in the sunshine for 15 minutes or so, we headed off to the Haldon Hills for a walk around the forest tracks. Here we had some excellent encounters, starting with fantastic views of Goldcrest, Nuthatch and Mistle Thrush before finding a stunning group of perched Crossbill, both male and female, which we watched feeding on pine cones for another 15 minutes. A Treecreeper gave fleeting views, Ravens could be heard cronking and displaying, and the first drumming Great Spotted Woodpecker was a nice reminder of spring on its way. We failed to encounter a Hawfinch on this occasion, but this was soon made up for with an incredible display of birds at the Haldon feeding station including lots of Siskins, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, Great Spotted Woodpecker and a stunning lone male Brambling amongst the large flock of Chaffinch. With lunch just around the corner, we then headed back towards the River Exe, stopping off to scan through a group of Dark-bellied Brent grazing on the golf course. We were fortunate to find a lone Pale-bellied amongst the group which gave excellent and clear comparison views. After a lovely lunch, we headed to our final location of the trip, Exminster Marshes, for a walk along the tow path on a rising tide. A Marsh Harrier was the lone raptor seen and caused some disruption with plumes of Wigeon and Teal suddenly taking to the water to join the smaller number of Pintail, Shoveler, Tufted Duck and Shelduck. There was a spattering of waders too including Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and a lone Ruff which proved a challenge to see as it fed between tussocks of Juncus.

Reaching our viewpoint over the estuary, we enjoyed spectacular views of thousands of waders including a wide mix of Dunlin, Black and Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Greenshank, Knot, Avocet, Golden and Grey Plover. It was a fantastic opportunity to test our ID skills and so we took our time to compare each species in situ, some easier than others. A Kingfisher perched close by brought a lot of excitement and a pair of Red-breasted

Mergansers drifting into the near shore was another notable highlight. The rarest bird came when we decided to scan the large flocks of Canada Geese; a lone Pink-footed Goose was located shortly before the whole flock took to the skies and landed in the fields adjacent. Despite our best efforts to relocate the bird, it seemed to be hidden behind a series of hedges which was rather unfortunate, but most people managed to spot it in flight. On route back, we just had time to add one more fantastic bird to our day list, a Eurasian Spoonbill, different to the day before, was feeding in a pool right next to the road - what a fabulous way to end the tour!

With our time up, all that was left was to head back to the hotel and to say our goodbyes. It had been a thoroughly enjoyable trip with a fantastic company, an array our birds and some stunning scenery to match. We look forward to the next time.

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Checklist

Birds (H = Heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	January 2022		
			28	29	30
1	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	.	✓	✓
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	.	✓	.
3	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	.	✓	✓
4	Dark-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	.	✓	✓
5	Pale-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>	.	1	1
6	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	.		1
7	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	.	2	.
8	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	.	✓	✓
9	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	.	✓	✓
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	.	✓	✓
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	.	✓	✓
12	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	.	✓	✓
13	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	.	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	.	✓	✓
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	.	✓	✓
16	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	.	1	.
17	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	.	1	.
18	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	.	✓	✓
19	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	1	.	.
20	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	.	H	.
21	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	.	✓	✓
22	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	.	✓	✓
23	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	.	✓	✓
24	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	.	3	
25	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	.	1	1
26	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	.	✓	.
27	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	.	✓	✓
28	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	.	✓	✓
29	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	.	.	1
30	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	.	✓	✓
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	.	✓	✓
32	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	.	✓	✓
33	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	.	✓	✓
34	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	.	.	✓
35	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	.	✓	✓
36	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	.	✓	✓
37	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	.	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January 2022		
			28	29	30
38	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	.	✓	✓
39	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	.	✓	✓
40	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	.	✓	.
41	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	.	✓	.
42	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	.	✓	✓
43	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	.	✓	.
44	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	.	✓	✓
45	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	.	1	.
46	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	.	✓	.
47	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	.	1	6
48	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	.	8	.
49	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	.	✓	✓
50	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	.	.	✓
51	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	.	✓	✓
52	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	.	.	1
53	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	.	✓	✓
54	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus canus</i>	.	2	.
55	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	.	✓	✓
56	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	.	✓	✓
57	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	.	1	2
58	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	.	1	
59	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	.	✓	✓
60	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	.	✓	✓
61	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	.	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	.	✓	✓
63	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	.	✓	✓
64	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	.	.	✓
65	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	✓	.	.
66	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	.	.	✓
67	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	.	✓	✓
68	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	.	✓	✓
69	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	.	✓	✓
70	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	.	✓	✓
71	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	.	.	✓
72	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓
73	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
74	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
75	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	.	.	✓
76	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	.	.	✓
77	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
78	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	.	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January 2022		
			28	29	30
79	Siberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita tristis</i>	.	1	.
80	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	.	✓
81	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	.	✓
82	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	.	.	✓
83	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
84	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
85	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	.	✓
86	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓
87	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	.	.	✓
88	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
89	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	.	1	.
90	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓
91	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓
92	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓
93	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	.	✓	✓
94	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	.	✓
95	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	.	✓
96	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	.	.	1
97	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓
98	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	✓	.	✓
99	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>	✓	.	.
100	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓
101	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓	✓	.
102	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	.	.	✓
103	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	.	.	✓