

South Devon in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

26th – 29th January 2023



Spotted Redshank



Black-necked Grebe



Cirl Bunting



Avocets

Tour report and 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 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.

Arguably one of the highlights of this tour was the large 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, Ringed Plover and Greenshank. In addition to this spectacle, other notable moments from this trip featured excellent views of Black-necked Grebe, Great Northern Diver, Spotted Redshank, Firecrest and Cirl Bunting. Other notable moments from our trip included the pods of Common Dolphin and two Stoat.

Day 1

Thursday 26th January

After collecting clients from Exeter train station and meeting the rest at our hotel in Exmouth, we headed straight to Exminster Marsh for a walk. The estuary provided fantastic views of flocks of waders with Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Grey Plover and Curlew feeding close. Ringed Plover, Avocet, Bar-tailed Godwit and Golden Plover all sat more distantly but viewable through the scope. Red-breasted Merganser, Cormorant and the odd duck floated by in the channel. Our first flock of Brent Geese flew overhead.

Flocks of Canada Geese inhabited the main marsh with a few Greylag Geese hidden in amongst. Ducks were also plentiful with Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler most numerous and additional smaller numbers of Pintail, Shelduck and Tufted Duck. Redwing and Stonechat fed out on the grasslands while Chiffchaff, Greenfinch and Linnet showed well in the surrounding hedgerows. One of the star birds of the visit was a Cetti's Warbler which flitting through some sparse reed for several minutes showing excellently. We stayed until dusk before returning to the hotel, later meeting for dinner and to run-through species seen.

Day 2

Friday 27th January

We spent the early part of the day in and around Bowling Green Marsh making use of the high tide roost. Large numbers of duck were spotted including a handful of Pochard, Tufted Duck and impressive numbers of Pintail among the more common Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler. It was the waders which provided the most impressive sight; Avocet (300+), Black-tailed Godwit (500+) and smaller number of Redshank and Dunlin mixed in. Snipe showed incredibly well, and a Marsh Harrier paid a brief visit. It was the persistent attacks by a Lesser Black-backed Gull, locally known as 'Psycho', which provided the most entertainment, constantly putting all the birds into the air. The only rarity seen was a single Water Pipit which showed at fairly close distance.

On the estuary we spotted flyby pairs of Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser. A small flock of Turnstone roosting with some Black-headed Gull provided a much loved encounter. Otherwise, with high tide, the estuary was fairly devoid of visible activity except for a second look at a Marsh Harrier.

After lunch we headed back to Exmouth for a walk around the marina and along the beach. We had no luck finding a local Black Redstart and were unlucky to encounter a very rogue dog which chased every bird from the shoreline. Shag, Cormorant, Curlew, Redshank and a mixed flock of gulls was the best of our birding here. We ended on a high with fantastic views of a flock of Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone further along the beach where the influence of the dog hadn't disturbed the birds.

Day 3

Saturday 28th January

Today we spent the morning around Torbay, exploring several locations in search of sea watching opportunities and more land-focused birding. We got off to a flier with fantastic views of Cirl Bunting (16+) with a mixed flock of Chaffinch, House Sparrow and Reed Bunting coming down to seed at a local feeding station. No sooner had we enjoyed these, both Goldcrest and Firecrest were found in a nearby hedge and showed for several minutes. Sea watching conditions were perfect with flat(ish) sea and soft light, both of which resulted in the most brilliant list of sightings. Black-necked Grebe, Gannet, Rock Pipit and Grey Seal all showed incredibly close. A number of Great Northern Diver, a couple of Red-throated Diver and a lone Common Scoter showed mid-range. A larger flock of Common Scoter, Guillemot, Razorbill and mixed flocks of gulls all showed more distantly. In addition to the excellent birding, a pod of Common Dolphin (30+) explored widely and were a constant presence throughout, coming within a few hundred meters at their closest, filling the scope lens.

Our second location proved less productive with another Black Redstart giving us the slip, however, a nice flock of Turnstone, good views of Common Gull and another close view of Great Northern Diver were all enjoyed.

Following lunch, we headed up to the Haldon Hills for a short walk around the Forest Park. We started with a short circular walk, picking up a flock of Siskin settled in the trees above us, a few Coal Tit and two flyover Common Crossbill. The surprise encounter was a Peregrine Falcon perched on a pylon - a fabulous bonus. The feeding station proved a hit with Siskin, Nuthatch, Great Spotted Woodpecker and a range of tit species all viewed regularly, however, the stand out bird was a Treecreeper which showed several times and came within just a few meters right at the death of our day.

Day 4

Sunday 29th January

Our last day was all spent on the River Exe, starting with a short walk at Dawlish Warren. Compared to yesterday, the sea was quiet with just groups of Great Crested Grebe, Shag and Cormorant for company. The inner warren proved more fruitful with excellent views of Greenfinch, singing Song Thrush and Cirl Bunting, and flocks of Meadow Pipit. The pool on Greenland Lake was over spilling, offering just a few Mallard, Shoveler and a Little Grebe. We returned to Exminster Marsh for high tide and found the marsh a lot busier with birds, particularly waders. Large flocks of Golden Plover were the notable highlight, swirling around with Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwit and Dunlin, all flushed by a passing Kestrel. We also took the chance to go back through all the ducks, finding a range similar to our previous visit.

After lunch we explored Powderham area, encountering some excellent flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare and a small cluster of Cirl Bunting, Yellowhammer and Linnet. We were all shocked when the two sausage-shaped mammals tangled on the road ahead turned out to be Stoats! Unfortunately, the arrival of another car sent them off into the undergrowth. Arriving at the estuary we watched as mixed groups of wader, duck and geese moved up

and down the estuary on the retreating tide. Brent Geese, Shelduck, Dunlin, Redshank, Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit and Red-breasted Merganser all seen. A pair of Egyptian Geese and a flock of Stock Dove graced some fields nearby which were a nice addition to our trip list.

We also tried a few spots towards Cockwood and Starcross in the hope of picking up a pair of Spoonbill but, despite our best efforts, they couldn't be located. Great views of a pair of Greenshank made up for it. We finished our day at Topsham, taking one last look at the wonderful Avocets and picking up a bonus Spotted Redshank, showing to ~10m and actively feeding or chasing off Common Redshank. A large flock of Brent Geese lifted from Exminster Marsh and landed on the river close by – a fitting end to our trip.

Our time was up and so all that was left was to return to the hotel, say our goodbyes and reflect on what had been a fabulous trip. Until the next one.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023			
		26	27	28	29
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓			✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓		✓
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	✓	✓		
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>				2
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓		✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓		✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓		✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓		✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	8	22		✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓		✓
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		4		
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓		✓
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			✓	
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		2		
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓		✓
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			3	
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓		✓
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			1	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓			✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓		✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓		✓	✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓			✓
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓		✓
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	✓	✓		✓

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023			
		26	27	28	29
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓		✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓			✓
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓			✓
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓			✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓		✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓		✓
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	✓			✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓		✓
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>				1
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓		✓
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				✓
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		✓		
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓	✓	✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓		✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus canus</i>			✓	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓	
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓		✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓		✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	✓
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓		✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓		✓
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓			✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓		✓	✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓	✓
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>			1	

Common name	Scientific name	January 2023			
		26	27	28	29
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓	
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓		✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓		
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓		✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓			✓
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		1		
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓	✓		✓
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			✓	
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓		
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				✓
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			16	✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓	