

South Devon in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd – 26th November 2023



Great Northern Diver, Brixham



Purple Sandpipers, Brixham



Grey Seal, Brixham



Cirl Bunting & House Sparrows, Broadlands

Tour report and photos by Mike Langman



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Summary

South Devon with its estuaries, bays, headlands, freshwater leys, heaths and woodland makes for a varied early winter birding tour. The area is well supported with well-known reserves: RSPB Exminster Marshes, Bowling Green Marsh and Aylesbeare Common. Also the National Nature Reserve at Berry Head, Torbay, Slapton & Beesands Ley plus Haldon Forest. The Exe estuary holds thousands of wintering wildfowl and waders, Tor Bay attracts divers and grebes, Berry Head with its Cirl Buntings, seals and cetaceans, Slapton for wildfowl, the heaths for Dartford Warblers and Stonechats and the forested hills for their finches and feeding station. A late November tour combines the excitement of late autumn migration with the arrival of many wintering species.

An unavoidable late change of hotel from Exmouth to Torbay saw a change in the original itinerary but enabled the tour to visit many other of South Devon's top wildlife sites.

Day 1

Thursday 23rd November

Following pick up at Exeter railway station, we had a direct drive to Torbay to meet the rest of the group at the Grand Hotel at 1400hrs. A quick check-in and bag drop allowed time for some afternoon birding at Broadsands, Tor Bay. It was a dull but dry afternoon. A small drainage ditch in the car park held Chiffchaff and Firecrest, both of which showed well. The Cirl Bunting feeding station was quiet with just a few House Sparrows dropping in. On the sea were a couple of Great Northern Divers, Great Crested Grebes, Gannets diving out in the bay and off on a distant headland a Peregrine Falcon was found resting. The evening gull roost started to build late afternoon with Common Gulls, numerous Black-headed and Herring Gulls and almost at dusk an adult Mediterranean Gull was spotted.

Back at the Grand Hotel the first log call was followed by a briefing covering the tour itinerary and especially the next day, then a short break before the evening meal.

Day 2

Friday 24th November

Breakfasts eaten, the group boarded the minibus after a brief interruption watching a Mistle Thrush and a couple of Goldcrests in the carpark. It was a cold but bright morning.

First stop today was the RSPB Exminster Marshes - a wonderful wetland and especially so after the previous weeks rain. Soon after starting our walk bird highlights included Marsh Harrier, Lapwings, Black-tailed Godwits many wildfowl and calling Cetti's Warbler.

Walking the canal bank a flock of Golden Plover and a single Snipe flew up from the marsh as probably a second Marsh Harrier and a Buzzard quartered the marsh. The bushes beside the canal with plenty of berry-bearing Hawthorn scrub held Redwing, Song Thrush and Fieldfare. Viewing the estuary from the Turf Pub, Grey Plovers, Avocets, Bar-tailed Godwit, Brent Geese and plenty of Dunlin were located.

Moving on we made a brief comfort stop at Dart's Farm Shop to pick up our packed lunches before driving up to RSPB Aylesbeare Common. The northerly wind had picked up substantially, making finding any birds tricky. Waiting and eating our lunches at a sheltered bench watch point, produced nothing more than a single Robin! However after a short stroll the target Stonechats were found and an accompanying Dartford Warbler too, that conveniently showed itself off perched at the top of a small gorse bush.

Time to go back to Topsham and the RSPB hide at Bowling Green ready for the high tide. We had a quick hike out to the Topsham Goat Walk, then scanning the Exe estuary finding Red-breasted Merganser, Knot, Avocet, and more Brent Geese. The estuary view point at the mouth of the Clyst Estuary was alive with birds. Hundreds of Redshank, Black and Bar-tailed Godwits were gathering on the mud, and also some Stock Doves in nearby trees. On Bowling Green Marsh Wigeon, Teal, Pintail and Tufted Duck were present as hundreds of waders, including some Greenshank dropped into roost. A wonderful way to finish off the days birding.

Back at the Hotel log call and briefing for the following day, before dinner.

Day 3

Saturday 25th November

Due to the accommodation being moved to our Torbay base the opportunity was used to cover the South Hams area of Devon rather than heading back up to the Exe. This proved popular with some excellent birding on a beautiful, crisp, still, sunny day.

We made two brief, successful, stops in Torbay to add Turnstones and then Gull Buntings, at Mike's popular feeding station - set up 23 years ago for this enigmatic 'Devon' Bunting.

Crossing the Dartmouth Ferry and then the scenic coastal road to Slapton Ley, then viewing the freshwater ley, many wildfowl were spotted, including lots of Coot, Wigeon, Gadwall, Tufted Ducks, Little Grebe, and also (very unusually for the site) three Pintail. Then some excitement as a young drake Lesser Scaup was picked out followed by a second (later in the day apparently four first winter drakes were claimed to have been seen!) On the beach a Mediterranean Gull cruised over the fishermen hoping for a snack.

A comfort stop at the Torcross end of Slapton, then we popped into the Stokely Farm Shop to pick up packed lunches before heading onto Beesands Ley.

Beesands was fairly quiet as we tucked into our lunches in the hide. Present were very small numbers of Tufted Ducks and just one Great Crested Grebe. Out on the sea were two Red-throated Divers, plenty of Shags and some Common Gulls. The hedgerows produced a calling Siberian Chiffchaff, Stonechat, Red Admiral and Peacock Butterflies and a lovely prolonged sighting of a Firecrest.

Then it was back to Slapton to walk the nature trail to the Deer Bridge marsh and back. Chiffchaffs were noted in several areas, plus two Firecrest, Mistle Thrush, calling Water Rail and Cetti's Warblers. Other wildlife included two Common Darter dragonflies – a very late record! From the viewing platform three 'Scaup' were found sound asleep, and examination of photos taken by a local photographer while we were present (and seen after the tour) revealed that at least one of these was a Greater Scaup! A distant female 'Scaup' looked to be a very good candidate for a Lesser Scaup but too few features were clinched to confirm it.

A last look at the sea in Start Bay before our drive back to Torquay was useful, producing Great Northern & Red-throated Divers, a flock of distant Common Scoters and then a lone Velvet Scoter.

Back at the hotel, log call following day briefing and dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 26th November

Bags packed and loaded into the van for our last day of the tour wildlife watching. Our first drizzly rain of the tour but it did clear mid-morning for a while. First stop was Brixham Breakwater, where all of our target species were located and seen extremely well. Our first were the Grey Seals, including one hunting a fast, leaping Garfish which it eventually caught and seemed to show it off to us before devouring the fish. Rock Pipit, Turnstone and the hoped for Purple Sandpipers were all located. Inside the breakwater harbour were at least four very confiding Great Northern Divers, Cormorant, Shag and a Razorbill.

Next stop Berry Head, where a walk down into the quarry proved very worthwhile with two Black Redstarts, Chiffchaffs, Rock Pipits, Grey Wagtail, Fulmar, Gannets, Kittiwakes and Raven all being seen. Other wildlife included several Harbour Porpoise and Common Eels in the pools which are filled through limestone sea caves, the eels are apparently taking a break from their incredible migration to the Sargasso Sea. The quarries geological feature - Neptunium Dyke was studied and explained.

Heavy drizzly rain set in so an early lunch break at the Guard House café was opted for. A warm coffee and hot soup was the order of the day. Venturing out to the top of the headland after our break was fantastic, with one or more Atlantic Bluefin Tuna exploding out of the sea - and all watched through our binoculars. Several more Harbour Porpoise were present too.

It was time to drive up to Haldon Forest, near to Exeter, where the low cloud and breezy conditions were going to make birding problematic but luckily just before the main car park a flock of Crossbills in a roadside conifer were spotted. This flock lingered long enough for us to exit the minibus and enjoy them for a few minutes before they were frightened off by a Carrion Crow. The bird feeding station at Buller's Hill was alive with birds; Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Coal Tit, Siskin, Goldfinch, Greenfinch and Chaffinch all coming and going as we watched patiently. A visit to the hide provided shelter from the wind and drizzle but nothing else. Walking the woodland footpaths added only Goldcrest and Wren to the visit.

Heading back to the café for coffee and cake our last log call was completed before it was time to drive to Exeter St David's Railway Station and say our goodbyes to most of the group. Final drop off was back at The Grand Hotel at 1730hrs.

A fabulous tour, good hotel, food, lovely group, beautiful scenery (and weather most of the time), plus so many great bird and other wildlife sightings.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓		
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓	
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓		
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓		
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓		
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓	✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓		
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>			✓	
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>			✓	
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			✓	✓
Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>			✓	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓		
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓		✓	✓
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			✓	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓		✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruifacilllis</i>			✓	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>				✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓		✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓		✓	✓
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓		✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓			
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			H	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓		✓	✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓		
Northern Lappingwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓		
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓		
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓		
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓		
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓		
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓	✓
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓		
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				✓
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓			✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</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>		H		✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europea</i>				✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	✓	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓		✓	
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓		✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓	
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓		
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</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>		✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	H		✓
Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓		
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia pytyopsittacus</i>				✓
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			✓	

Others

Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26
Mammals					
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>				✓
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Bank Vole	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			✓	
Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>			✓	
Fish					
Common Eel	<i>Anguilla anguilla</i>				✓
Atlantic Bluefin Tuna	<i>Thunnus thynnus</i>				✓
Garfish	<i>Belone belone</i>				✓
Butterflies					
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	
Peacock	<i>Aglais io</i>			✓	
Dragonflies					
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>			✓	
Fungi					
Earth Tongue	<i>Glutinoglossum glutinosum</i>				✓