# **Norfolk's Winter Highlights**

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th - 11th November 2021



Common Cranes coming home to roost



Pink-footed Geese dropping in



Great Grey Shrike at Waxham



Red Knot spectacle at Snettisham



Grey Seals on the beach



An obliging Red Knot at Snettisham

Report & photos by Mike Crewe



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#### **Summary**

With the weather remaining remarkably mild for the time of year, our first 'Winter Highlights' tour had very much an autumn feel to it, but there were certainly plenty of birds here in good numbers, both at the coast and around the Broads. We started in the west of the county with a high tide visit to the remarkable spectacle of swirling masses of waders at Snettisham, on the Wash. This spectacle was followed up by a visit to Titchwell, where we were able to single out a wide variety of waders and get to know them more intimately. From direct comparisons of Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits feeding side-by-side, through parties of busily feeding Ruff and spangly Golden Plover to a surprise fly-by Jack Snipe, we covered a great variety of species.

At Holkham, we enjoyed a great range of habitats and their associated birds; from wonderful Shore Larks on the saltings to Sanderling along the beach and Razorbills and Red-breasted Mergansers on the sea; from calling Nuthatches in the autumn-tinted Sweet Chestnuts to Pied Wagtails trotting around the feet of Fallow Deer in the open parkland; and finally the busy scenes on the lake as a dense pack of Shovelers sieved the surface of the water and Pochard and Tufted Ducks snoozed under the banks.

Switching to the east of the county, we found ourselves in the flatter landscapes of the Norfolk Broads, where we enjoyed wonderful farmhouse cooking. Despite very settled weather, migrants were on the move along the dunes – especially Blackbirds and Siskins – and a few Red-throated Divers showed very well close to shore. Pinkfooted Geese were almost constant companions as they criss-crossed the expansive skies and we added some less common visitors to our list in the shape of a Great Grey Shrike and two Lapland Buntings. Red Deer and Chinese Water Deer vied with the pupping Grey Seals in providing mammal highlights for the trip, but surely the prize for trip highlight overall goes to all of those Common Cranes that graced us at either end of the day, culminating in a fabulous single flock of 31 birds that glided in to roost in front of us.

#### Day 1

## Sunday 7th November

Meeting up at our hotel at 2pm gave us a chance to have a quick run through the plans for the coming few days over a cup of tea before we were able to check into our rooms. Once all the domestics had been sorted, we took a short walk along the beach to see what was on offer near the hotel. A good mix of gulls gave us the opportunity to compare Common and Black-headed Gulls and to watch Herring Gulls dropping shellfish from a great height to get at their afternoon meals. The tideline was rather far away as the tide was well out, though incoming, so we had to wait for better views of some species. But a good range of waders included Oystercatcher, Knot, Grey Plover, Curlew, Redshank, Turnstone and both Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits.

A look at the cliffs at Hunstanton is always of interest, with their famous bands of white Ferriby chalk, reddish Hunstanton chalk and orange-ochre Carstone, all dating from around 108 to 99 million years ago. The cliffs also provided us with nice views of several Fulmars as they glided effortlessly past and settled on favoured spots. The light was already starting to fade as we made our way back to the hotel, chilled a little, but ready for what was to come tomorrow...

#### Day 2

### **Monday 8th November**

Our first full day began at first light as we collected packed breakfasts and headed south to Snettisham. With the RSPB advertising today as one of their 'high tide spectaculars' we arrived to find the car park full, but we found plenty of room in the nearby beach car park. This meant a slightly longer walk but we made it in good time, with a nice procession of Oystercatchers and Dunlin escorting us as we walked. Parties of Starlings were also a regular feature and provided the bulk of a rather light 'visible migration' that was taking place, though during our time here we also notched up a scattering of Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Linnets and Goldfinches, plus a few Rock Pipits and elusive Bramblings among other things – a single Snow Bunting right overhead was a brief bonus, too.

But the main event was just starting as we waited for the tide to turn. As the waters began to recede, the buzz of activity gradually increased; flocks of Grey Plover, Curlew, Redshank, Dunlin and Bar-tailed Godwit became restless and started to move out from the last traces of mud that had stood uncovered by water. Then of course there was the Knot; all those Knot! Great, sinuous strands of birds stretched out across the sky one moment, then condensed to an amorphous blob seconds later – then stretched out again and twisted in a figure-of-eight. A Peregrine raked through the back of the flock and caused even more activity as evasive moves were called for. As mud was uncovered, birds spread out and we took the opportunity to work through the different species as they came closer to us and were easier to pick out. Time and tide quite literally did not wait for us and we followed the receding waters back to the car park, picking out a few Pintail amongst the commoner ducks and enjoying some very busy, bulldozing Turnstones and a clockwork Sanderling on the way back. For the record, the official counts at Snettisham for today were: 80,000 Knot, 5,420 Oystercatcher, 2,850 Dunlin and 2,800 Bartailed Godwit.

After a quick stop off at the hotel, we took a circuitous route to Titchwell to avoid the road closure at the bridge on the coast road on the edge of the village. The backroads route was fortuitous in providing us with the wonderful spectacle of large numbers of Pink-footed Geese descending on a beet field to feed. We found a few Red-legged Partridge along the way before we made it to the RSPB reserve and squeezed into the very last parking spot. Lunch followed then we set off for our afternoon adventure. We tried hard to head for the beach first, but it's always impossible to pass on all of the birds that present themselves on the reserve! We did pretty well, though, but only a few lucky people caught sight of a Water Rail that ran out of the reeds and had a right old go at a totally innocent Redshank! Down at the beach, the tide was well out, but we walked down to the mussel beds and enjoyed a great variety of waders in perfect, sunny weather. All the bird species that we had seen at Snettisham were here to be enjoyed in closer detail – and we even managed to get both Bar-tailed and Blacktailed Godwit side-by-side for perfect comparison. The sea was rather quiet but did provide us with a good number of Great Crested Grebes and a couple of Razorbills.

Back on the reserve, we spent time in the main hide overlooking the freshwater lagoon. Great numbers of Teal were much in evidence, with smaller numbers of Mallard, Wigeon and Shoveler. A Common Snipe was feeding actively, as were three Avocets and several Ruff. We returned to the main path and, in better light, had another look at the Ruff, found some very smart Golden Plover and enjoyed glittering Lapwings and Teal in the afternoon sun. A Jack Snipe gave us a fly-by and ever more birds appeared as the sun got lower and roosting became the priority. An ever-growing gathering of Lesser Black-backed Gulls eventually provided us with a nice Yellow-legged Gull and Marsh Harriers – perhaps 15 or so – made their way towards their favourite patch of

reedbed. A great mass of Starlings whirled around in the background and even further out, a vast sea of Pinkfooted Geese began to make their way towards Wells for the night.

#### Day 3

## **Tuesday 9th November**

This was to be our day of travel, as we transferred across Norfolk to our second hotel. But we still had time available to fit in some walks and birding where we could, and some of us started with a look at the sea at Hunstanton before breakfast. Good numbers of Starlings were hurtling west along the coastline, with smaller numbers of Greenfinches, Chaffinches, Siskins, Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and a few Bramblings. Two Little Egrets headed east and a Mediterranean Gull breezed by, while several Red-breasted Mergansers were on the open water and a few Common Scoter scuttled past.

After breakfast, we took the detour around the roadworks for the last time and headed for the Holkham Estate. While we could have headed in any direction around the estate and found a greater selection of birds, we opted for the exciting opportunity of finding Shore Larks on the beach and headed out around the seaward side of the dunes. We were soon in the right place and quite quickly located four Shore Larks, shuffling around and feeding quietly on the open saltmarsh. Great views followed of these increasingly uncommon birds that still come here most winters in small numbers. Further round, we gave the sea a quick look from the beach and found some reasonably close Razorbills and Red-breasted Mergansers, while seven, juvenile, Gannets careened just beyond the breakers. Further out, Red-throated Diver and Slavonian Grebe were discernible with a little imagination among the more frequent Great Crested Grebes!

After lunch at the visitor centre (which produced Red Kite and Peregrine for some), we scanned the marsh briefly then headed up into Holkham Park. Passing the Fallow Deer herds, we noted a rather brief Nuthatch and heard a Green Woodpecker before arriving at the main lake. Ducks were plentiful here and great rafts of Shoveler were tagging around in circles and filtering out their food. Pochard and Tufted Duck were duly noted, too, along with a scattering of Gadwall, two Egyptian Geese and a lone Barnacle Goose. Both Little and Great Crested Grebes were present and showed well. A party of Long-tailed Tits passed quickly along the lake side and appeared to be carrying a couple of Treecreepers in their midst, but these melted away all too quickly after the briefest of views.

We circled back round to the car park and set off for our final destination of the day in the Norfolk Broads, all magically arriving at rather similar times, even though we mostly travelled independently – thank heavens for modern navigation systems! With the light fading, there was no time for local birding, but we certainly made time for tea and cake!

## Day 4

## Wednesday 10th November

Today was a rather dreary day weather-wise, with grey skies giving way to encroaching mizzle, but it did brighten up for the final hour or so. We began with a pre-breakfast drive along a local farm track, which got us nicely into some extensive areas of grazing marsh. A few of the commoner birds of the area were noted along the way before we stopped to have a proper scan from a good vantage point. We enjoyed a female Chinese Water Deer that approached us quite closely before realising we were there and swimming off across the main dyke. Several more of these small deer were to follow before we noticed a couple of Red Deer hinds with their youngsters.

The hoped-for highlight, however, came in the shape of several groups of Cranes, totalling 28 birds, that glided gracefully in and settled down to feed behind a line of trees.

After breakfast, we ventured out a short way to some grass fields that are often frequented by wild swans. We were in luck as, six Bewick's and 22 Whooper Swans were counted with the regular party of local Mute Swans. We continued to the dunes, gaining height in the hope of scanning the fields and sea for goodies. Unfortunately, inland was becoming increasingly misty and the sea proved to be very quiet in the very calm conditions, although we did enjoy three Red-throated Divers that were feeding close to shore. A short drive further on, we stopped briefly to study an adult Mediterranean Gull before stopping off at the Horsey seal colony. The Grey Seals have been late in getting their pupping season under way this year, but youngsters were now starting to appear and saved us a longer walk to more distant spots. For those interested in such things, we also took a moment out of our schedule to look at a small colony of the nationally rare Grey Hair-grass (Corynephorus canescens).

Lunch was now in order, so we made our way to Hickling Broad by way of Martham to buy supplies. With lunch complete, we made a circular loop around Hickling Reserve, though it was rather quiet at times and had us working hard for our birds. Parties of Long-tailed Tits, rafts of Coots and hunting Marsh Harriers kept us occupied as we toured the now yellowing reeds, while a Great Egret passing over the area was a nice bonus. A Water Rail was glimpsed before he realised he was being watched and scuttled off back into cover. The overlook at Brendan's Marsh provided us with a great range of ducks in improving light conditions and a suggestion of a sunset indicated that the skies were clearing a little. The local management team – four Konik Horses – entertained us for a while before we headed for the raptor roost watchpoint. Here, we rounded off the day in great style as we witnessed a good number of Cranes coming in to roost. We totalled 49 birds, with the largest party being a flock of 31 birds that seemed to come in in a direction that suggested that they had spent the day where we had seen them first thing this morning. As Marsh Harriers continued to come in to the reeds to roost, a Tawny Owl made its presence known and we walked back along the lane to the upbeat, 'wink-wink' calls of Pink- footed Geese.

#### Day 5

## **Thursday 11th November**

Our pre-breakfast walk took us along the lane towards the village today, as small parties of Siskins, Chaffinches and Bramblings were calling overhead and we hoped to find some nearby. In the event, they mostly seemed to be passing further on, but we found a few migrant Blackbirds and Redwings, an approachable group of Longtailed Tits and a nicely viewable Green Woodpecker feeding on the ground. A single Goldcrest fed in a sallow bush but proved elusive.

After our final breakfast together, we sorted out bags and bills then headed off to nearby Waxham in search of a Great Grey Shrike that had been around for some time in the coastal bushes. Somewhat miraculously, we found it at great distance from the road when we first scanned along the hedgelines, as it chased a Meadow Pipit higher and higher into the air, but it promptly disappeared and, despite an intensive search of the area, we couldn't refind it. We did, however, find quite a number of Continental Blackbirds and Song Thrushes in the Blackthorn scrub. Eventually we decided we should leave and entertain ourselves elsewhere, but as we left, the shrike mysteriously re-appeared, this time off to the south of us in a broken line of old bushes. This gave us much better views in improving light and eventually we left happy.

We drove a little further around the coast to Happisburgh and walked out along the clifftop to view some nearby fields. We had saddled ourselves with the daunting task of seeking out little brown jobs in a massive brown field! Little was seen at first but for some rather distant Meadow Pipits and Starlings, but eventually we were nicely sidetracked by the appearance of several Mediterranean Gulls of varying ages. Heading back to a lower part of the field, we were encouraged by the presence of a busy flock of Linnets and good numbers of Meadow Pipits and Skylarks and a careful scan finally turned up what we were really after – two, smartly-marked Lapland Buntings (or Lapland Longspurs if you prefer). These made for a fitting end to our final morning and we headed over to Sea Palling for lunch.

With lunch completed, we nipped back to base and said goodbye to those heading off to get a good start on their journeys home before the day closed. The rest of us popped back to the Hickling Broad Reserve for an hour or so of scanning from a good vantage point. As well as the usual ducks and some entertainment from the Koniks as they tested the water depth in their current home, we enjoyed our final Marsh Harriers, a busy Great Egret and two perched Peregrines before we circled back to the visitor centre and began the homeward trek.

Many thanks to everyone for making this a really enjoyable trip with some great company and great birding – hope to see you all again soon!

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## **Species Lists**

Common name	Scientific name	7/11	8/11	9/11	10/11	11/11
Birds						
Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		✓	✓		4+
Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus		✓	✓	✓	✓
Brent Goose	Branta bernicla	8	✓	✓		
Barnacle Goose	Branta leucopsis			1		
Greylag Goose	Anser anser		✓	✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus		✓	✓	✓	✓
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor		1	4	✓	✓
Bewick's Swan	Cygnus colum. bewickii				6	
Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus		1		22	5
Egyptian Goose	Alopochen aegyptiaca		1	2	2	
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna		✓	1	✓	
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓
Gadwall	Mareca strepera			12	10	
Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta		10+			
Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Pochard	Aythya ferina			10		
Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula		1	<b>✓</b>		
Common Scoter	Melanitta nigra			12		
Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula		1			
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator			8		
Feral Rock Dove	Columba livia		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>
Stock Dove	Columba oenas		1		4	
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto			1	5	
Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus		1		1	
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>		
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra		2	✓	✓	
Common Crane	Grus grus				49	
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		6	3+		
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus		8	<b>✓</b>	1	
Slavonian Grebe	Podiceps auritus			1		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	1		
Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta		7			
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	
European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria		✓			40
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola	10+	✓	✓		
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		5			
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	1	
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica	<b>√</b>	✓			
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa	4	<b>✓</b>			
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	6	<b>✓</b>		12+	
Red Knot	Calidris canutus	1	<b>✓</b>			
Ruff	Calidris pugnax		12			
Sanderling	Calidris alba	2	✓	✓	<b>√</b>	
Dunlin	Calidris alpina	<u> </u>	✓			
Purple Sandpiper	Calidris maritima				1	
Little Stint	Calidris minuta		2			
Jack Snipe	Lymnocryptes minimus		1			
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago		3		5	
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	10+	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	_	
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	✓	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>

Common name	Scientific name	7/11	8/11	9/11	10/11	11/11
Birds						
Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus			1	1	6+
Common Gull	Larus canus	✓	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis		1			
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus		30+		2	1
Razorbill	Alca torda		2	10		
Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata			2	3	
Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis	6		3+		
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus			8		
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		3+	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓
Great Egret	Ardea alba				2	1
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	2	10+	3	1	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus				1	
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		15	✓	20+	6
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus				1	_
Red Kite	Milvus milvus		3	2		
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo			2	2	3
Western Barn Owl	Tyto alba				(1)	
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco				h	
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		h		1	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major				-	h
Green Woodpecker	Picus viridis			h	1	1
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	1	2	···	· ·	
Peregrine	Falco peregrinus	'	1	1		2
Great Grey Shrike	Lanius excubitor		'	<u>'</u>		1
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius			<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	ı
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica		2	1	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula		<u>∠</u>	· ·	<b>✓</b>	<b>-</b>
Rook	Corvus frugilegus				<b>✓</b>	<b>V</b>
Carrion Crow	Corvus rrugilegus Corvus corone		<b>✓</b>		· ✓	<b>✓</b>
Coal Tit	Periparus ater		,	h	,	<b>V</b>
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		<b>√</b>	II   ✓	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>
Great Tit			· ·	,	2+	<b>V</b>
	Parus major Panurus biarmicus		•		h	•
Bearded Reedling	Alauda arvensis	1	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	11	45.
Eurasian Skylark		1	<b>V</b>	4		15+
Shore Lark	Eremophila alpestris		h	4	h	
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti		h	<b>✓</b>	h ✓	h
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus			<b>,</b>		
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita				h	4
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	1
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		<b>-</b>		<b>V</b>	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea			1		
Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		<b>✓</b>	2	<b>✓</b>	
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		✓ ✓			<b>√</b>
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula			<b>√</b>	✓	✓
Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris		20+	10		20+
Redwing	Turdus iliacus	<b>√</b>				5
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos					2
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	<b>✓</b>	<b>√</b>	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		1			1
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		2+		<b>✓</b>	✓
Dunnock	Prunella modularis		2	1	<b>✓</b>	✓
Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii		✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis		✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Pipit	Anthus spinoletta				1	

Common name	Scientific name	7/11	8/11	9/11	10/11	11/11
Birds						
Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		<b>✓</b>	h		
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓
Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla		h	h		h
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	h
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓
Lesser Redpoll	Acanthis cabaret					1
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		<b>✓</b>		✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus			<b>✓</b>		✓
Lapland Bunting	Calcarius Iapponicus					2
Snow Bunting	Plectrophenax nivalis		1			
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella				✓	✓
Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus		✓		2+	h
Mammals						
European Hare	Lepus europaeus		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus		<b>✓</b>			
Eastern Grey Squirrel	Sciurus carolinensis			<b>✓</b>		
Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus				✓	<b>✓</b>
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus				✓	
Fallow Deer	Dama dama			<b>✓</b>		
Western Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus			<b>✓</b>		
Chinese Water Deer	Hydropotes inermis				✓	
Reeves's Muntjac	Muntiacus reevesi		✓	✓		
Dragons & Damsels						
Common Darter	Sympetrum striolatum		✓			