

# Norfolk's Winter Highlights

Naturetrek Tour Report

2nd – 6th February 2022

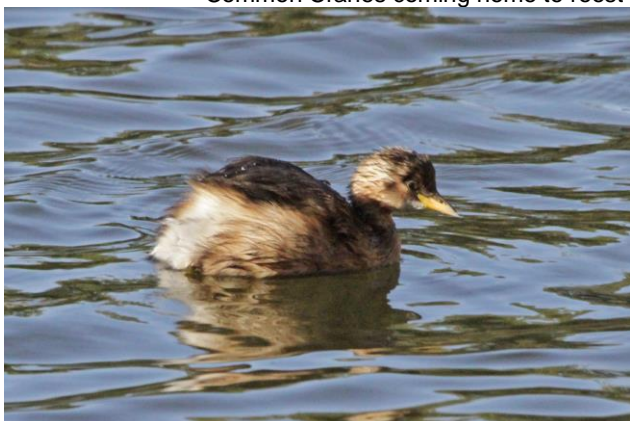
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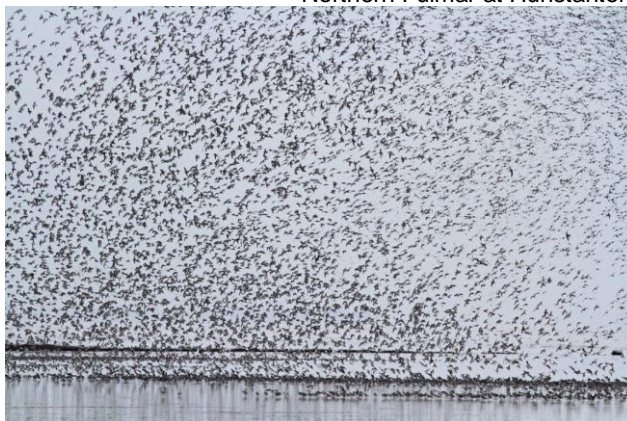
Common Cranes coming home to roost



Northern Fulmar at Hunstanton



Little Grebe at Holkham



Red Knot spectacle at Snettisham

Report & photos by Mike Crewe



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Tour participants: Mike Crewe & Andrew Tongue (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

Norfolk in winter can certainly produce some great days in the field, despite the vagaries of the weather. The forecast was not overly encouraging for this trip, but stiff upper lips won the day and, in the event, the forecast rain mostly stayed away and the winds – though blustery – didn't affect things too much. The first couple of days provided spectacular sunsets as a backdrop to our birding, giving hunting Barn Owls a peculiarly pink glow and casting an amazing light over proceedings as we watched twinkling Golden Plovers and seemingly endless groups of Marsh Harriers coming in to various roosts.

Our early mornings were pretty spectacular, too, as we enjoyed great swaths of waders sweeping across the skies over The Wash and along the local beaches – long may we remember all of those fabulous Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit as they wheeled and turned over the receding tide. Pink-footed Geese were a feature both along the North Norfolk Coast and in the Norfolk Broads, but it was in the latter location that we were to enjoy some great moments with majestic Common Cranes and, after some particularly keen sleuthing, we even managed to track down a group of wintering Cattle Egrets, which we eventually enjoyed at close range. Mammals featured strongly, too, with Reeves's Muntjacs and Red and Chinese Water Deer out on the marshes, Brown Hares in the fields and Grey Seals a-plenty on the beach. And lest we forget, there was the magic of a hunting Short-eared Owl, the whoosh of a passing Woodcock, the wonder of a Water Rail feeding in full view, sleeping Purple Sandpipers, a cavalcade of ducks and swans and those very soggy Grey Partridges.

## Day 1

## Wednesday 2nd February

The vagaries of traffic caused some slight delays, but we all eventually met up at Hunstanton a little after 2pm and got ourselves checked-in and sorted in our rooms. We took a late afternoon walk at nearby Holme-next-the-sea, heading out across the golf course to the beach and checking the neighbouring dunes. The golf course provided us with a fine pair of Mistle Thrushes before we headed onto the beach, where a nice suite of shorebirds was feeding. Common, Great Black-backed, Herring and Black-headed Gulls were plentiful, giving good opportunities to compare them, while Curlew, Oystercatchers, Grey Plover, Sanderling, Bar-tailed Godwits and more were just a sampler of what was to come tomorrow! With the tide creeping in, we headed for higher ground and took a quick look at the dunes and marshes from a raised bank. A wonderful, evening spectacle unfolded before us, under the most extraordinary sunset, as a Barn Owl hunted over the freshmarsh, at least 17 Marsh Harriers tilted back and forth and skeins of conversational Pink-footed Geese tagged across the sky.

## Day 2

## Thursday 3rd February

Our first full day was to be full indeed, as we were up and away before 7am and taking the short drive south to the Snettisham RSPB Reserve. The walk out provided shadowy glimpses of the gravel pits as the day gradually dawned and, eventually, we could start to pick out a few ducks, Little Grebes and Little Egrets. Up on the raised bank that overlooks the vast expanses of The Wash, we quickly picked out a dense pack of roosting Oystercatchers on a gravel bar, while the open water was alive with Shelducks, Mallard and Wigeon. Overlooking the main wader roost site, which we reached just on high tide, we ate our packed breakfasts and watched as the

tide dutifully turned and the wader activity began to pick up. Large numbers of Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Dunlin made up the bulk of the birds, with huddles of Curlew and Oystercatchers also in the mix. The steadily increasing areas of mud were quickly populated by hungry birds and we were soon treated to a sinuous, writhing 'sky monster' as dense packs of birds wheeled in the air. A Merlin appeared all too distantly and caused a certain consternation in the flocks, but otherwise, all seemed rather peaceful, as parties of chattering Turnstones began to head out from the high tide roost on the gravel pits and were shortly followed by a great whoosh, as a mass of Knot streamed back out onto the mud.

Satisfied with the spectacle, we headed back to base for a freshen up, which was followed by a short walk out to the nearby cliffs on the edge of Hunstanton, via the beach. This provided us with our first Mediterranean Gull out on the receding tideline and some lovely close-ups of the argumentative Fulmars on their cliff-ledge nest sites. There was much else to look at here, including the interesting geology of the cliffs and a fine collection of shells on the beach. We headed over to Titchwell RSPB reserve for lunch and, after a fair amount of searching through the parties of Chaffinches and Goldfinches, we eventually located a few Bramblings in the Alders near the feeders. A few yards further on, and a Water Rail was feeding in full view, actively tossing leaves around with great abandon as it searched for a late lunch. The freshwater pools were a little quiet from the hides, but Gadwalls in glorious close-up were well worth seeing.

We made the usual valiant effort to head for the beach then work slowly back, but there's always too much to see and too many opportunities to get side-tracked! But we did eventually reach the beach and we enjoyed a nice range of waders at close range, feeding on the exposed mussel beds. A chilly wind was blowing and we were quite eager to get into a little cover, so we headed back to the hides for some eye-to-eye contact with masses of Teal and Lapwings and some smart Pintail. As the sun started to draw down, we were treated to another glorious sunset, with two different Barn Owls hunting out over the marsh, a wonderful gathering of Marsh Harriers and excitable activity from Starlings and a nervous flock of Golden Plover that alerted us to a prospecting Peregrine.

## Day 3

## Friday 4th February

This was to be our day of travel, as we transferred across Norfolk to our second hotel. But we still had time for a full day along the coast. The weather forecast looked far from inspiring, as gusty winds were set to rake through the area, so we needed to think through our day carefully and change things if it seemed necessary. In the event, the weather proved a little better after something of a soggy night and the birds were slowly waking up and drying out. As we arrived at Holkham, masses of ducks and geese were busy out on the freshmarsh and we soon picked out some very bedraggled Grey Partridge that had been sheltering from the wind under a bramble patch. A couple of Red Deer made a nice addition to the mammal list and a few Common Snipe and Ruff were feeding out on the grass. The walk out to the beach started very well, with a Woodcock zooming right past us as it shot through the pines. The weather was sunny at times, but also rather blustery and some of the birds we were looking for had clearly decided to seek out shelter elsewhere. We did manage to catch a quick look at a small party of Snow Buntings, while flocks of Sanderling and a huddle of Rock Pipits proved far more obliging.

Lunch at the Holkham café gave some of us a change for a better look at some Ruff before we decided to partake in a 'wild goose chase' at Cley. Unfortunately, the Red-breasted Goose that had been at Cley had taken to spending time on the freshmarsh at Blakeney – a site that is fine if you have half a day to walk out there and

back! So we settled for a scan of the gulls busily working the tideline before we made our way over to the Norfolk Broads to begin the second half of our trip, a half that began in the best possible way with hot drinks and home-made cake! After settling in to our new rooms, we took a late afternoon drive into the local marshes and soon found our first Chinese Water Deer. As Rooks and Jackdaws gathered prior to going to roost and skeins of Pink-footed Geese gossiped their way by, we found a few family parties of Common Cranes, at first on the ground then shortly making their way to their night roost, with 16 birds eventually passing our way.

## Day 4

## Saturday 5th February

The day dawned brighter than anticipated, though still rather windy. Some of us took a pre-breakfast stroll along the lane and found nice feeding parties of Common Gulls and Redwings in the cow fields, as well as a fly-over Great Spotted Woodpecker. After breakfast, we set out to see what we could see from the vehicles for a while as the wind continued to be somewhat on the annoying side. Our drive round proved to be a good move though, as we eventually came across a nice herd of 17 Bewick's and five Whooper Swans, giving us the perfect opportunity to compare the differences between them. The rest of the morning was a little less successful in finding the birds that we were looking for, but there was still much to enjoy as we gradually made our way along the back roads and headed to Horsey. At Horsey Gap, we took a short walk out to view the Grey Seal colony from the respectful distance of the top of the dunes and Pat dug out three Purple Sandpipers on the rock piles for us.

Lunch was beckoning so we continued our circuit of the area and managed to squeeze in at the café at the great tithe barn at Waxham. Well fed and satisfied, we spent the afternoon at the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Hickling. The vast acres of reedbed here tend to be quiet in the winter, but we did get some great flight views of Marsh Harriers and two Great Egrets, a flighty Water Pipit and some nice views over Hickling Broad. The new, open wetland created recently, provided us with a nice diversity of ducks to enjoy, before we started the walk out to the raptor roost watchpoint. Marsh Harriers escorted us for much of the way and a nice highlight came in the form of a party of 18 Cranes that drifted overhead. At the watchpoint, Andrew showed his talent for horse racing commentary as he kept a vocal track of a male Hen Harrier long enough for us to locate it against the busy backdrop of trees and reeds. Marsh Harriers a-plenty were cruising around before going to roost, with a binocular sweep of the area producing a minimum count of 34 birds in the air at one point! And to cap it all, the Pinkies came squeaking across the sky yet again and, in the final light of day, some notched up a Woodcock to add to their day list. Time for more, wholesome home-cooking back at base...

## Day 5

## Sunday 6th February

The weather forecast seemed to have been leading up to today for a while and it looked like we were in for a tough one. An early-morning walk was cancelled due to rain and we hatched a plan to try to visit sites that would keep us out of the worst of it, but still allow us to get something out of the day. But, in the event, yours truly was proven to be unnecessarily concerned yet again! The rain eased off and we set out to see what we could find from the shelter of the vehicles. Plugging the few remaining gaps in the list on the last day is always in the lap of the gods, but today they seemed to be smiling on us. We took a second circuit around the regular crane area that we had patrolled yesterday and today we hit gold, finding at least 19 birds feeding in open fields – and with the rain now gone, we could step out and enjoy great scope views. With some obliging Fieldfares, Stock Doves and

other ground-feeding birds, it was turning into a better day than we might have feared. Having failed to locate some cattle pens near Martham yesterday, some online detective work overnight turned up trumps and we headed back to the wonderfully named Cess Lane. A short walk along a somewhat insalubrious and muddy lane eventually got us our second treat of the day, as we caught a glimpse of white behind a herd of cows. Figuring out a better viewpoint further down the road, we were soon enjoying a party of six Cattle Egrets feeding in a grassy field (and with a seventh discovered back by the cows later).

Our luck would surely run out soon – so we decided to go for the toughest one next – Short-eared Owl on a windy and occasionally wet day! Our walk through the dunes at Winterton was draughty but the scenery was very special and we enjoyed a nice range of interesting plants, including one of the UK's rarest grasses – Grey Hair-grass (*Corynephorus canescens*) at this, its most important UK site. As we were making the final leg of our circular walk, we suddenly noticed a Short-eared Owl, making its way along behind a dune ridge, but rising periodically to show against the sky. Eventually we had nice looks as it cruised across in front of us and went to ground again. It was a fabulous final day to the trip, with three species searched for and all found. All that remained was our final lunch (which proved to be pretty voluminous!) before those of us who had stuck it out to the end, began our journeys home.

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

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## Species Lists (✓ = recorded but not counted, h = heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	2/2	3/2	4/2	5/2	6/2
<b>Birds</b>						
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓	✓
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>			4		
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		6		✓	
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			5		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>			✓		
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus colum. bewickii</i>				17	
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>				5	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		2	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		6	20		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		5+			
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		10	2	✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		1			
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		10			
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		15+			
Feral Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓		✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>				40+	20
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		2		h	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	1		
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			16	24+	19
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	1		
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		1			
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		9			
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓		h	
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		6+	3		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	✓	✓			
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		6+			
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓	20		
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>			6		
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				3	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>			1	1	

Common name	Scientific name	2/2	3/2	4/2	5/2	6/2
<b>Birds</b>						
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		4	4+	2+	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		2			
Common Gull	<i>Larus 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>		1		6+	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			1		
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		1			
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		20+			
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>					5+
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>					7
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	3+	2+	3+	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			2	2	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	✓			
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				2	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	17	12	✓	50+	✓
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				3	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1	5		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			2+	2	2+
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1	2			
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				h	
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>					1
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	1	✓	✓	✓
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1			
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			✓	✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	20+	✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h		h	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1			
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		2			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	✓	✓	✓	✓
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>		1	1	1	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2			2	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>				2	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		h		✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		2	1	✓	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1		
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		6		1	
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			10		



Common name	Scientific name	2/2	3/2	4/2	5/2	6/2
<b>Birds</b>						
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		3			
European Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		h			
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		4		3	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓			✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				2	
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			6	1	
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>					1
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		2			
<b>Mammals</b>						
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓			✓
Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓		✓	
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓			
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			✓		
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>			✓	✓	
Reeves's Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓