Norfolk's Winter Highlights

Naturetrek Tour Report

2nd - 6th March 2022



Common Cranes coming home to roost



Northern Fulmar at Hunstanton



Long-eared Owl at dusk



Male Marsh Harrier checks us out at Ludham

Tour report & images by Mike Crewe

UK



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Mike & Megan Crewe (leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients

Summary

This short break in Norfolk gave us a great opportunity to sample some of the best winter birding that Norfolk has to offer, in two rather different locations. Based first in the northwest corner of the county, we sampled the delights of the North Norfolk coast, with its sweeping saltmarshes, coastal sand dunes and extensive grazing marshes. Ducks, geese and waders abounded as we enjoyed a great wealth of species, from parties of Sanderling charging around on the beach, to the far more passive behaviour of Common Snipe and Black-tailed Godwits. With winter drawing to a close now, parties of Pink-footed Geese could be seen heading out to sea off Hunstanton to begin their journey north, but good numbers of Brent Geese still remained on the saltmarsh and brought with them a spectacular Red-breasted Goose. Holkham excelled itself – as ever – by providing great views of Shore Larks, wonderful close encounters with Treecreepers and Goldcrests and our discovery of a pair of Ravens attending a nest.

Moving to the Norfolk Broads in the east of the county, we enjoyed wonderful hospitality as we found ourselves perfectly placed for local trips out to watch feeding parties of Common Cranes, hunting and displaying Marsh Harriers and – best of all – a fabulous Long-eared Owl. Indeed, birds of prey were particularly in evidence on this trip with Common Buzzards starting their spring displays, Peregrines hunting waders and Starlings, a fly-by from a male Hen Harrier and a Short-eared Owl keeping an eye on us from its daytime roost. As well as birds, we enjoyed some nice mammal encounters, especially with those oddly endearing Chinese Water Deer.

Day 1

Wednesday 2nd March

Our Norfolk adventure began with an afternoon meet-up at Hunstanton, where we were soon able to check in to our rooms and get settled briefly before we headed out to make the best of the late afternoon. We headed for the RSPB reserve at Titchwell and began with a check of the feeders. Here, a nice range of the commoner woodland species were present and, before long, the hoped-for Bramblings turned up – a female and a couple of smart males. Our efforts to head for the beach were soon abandoned as there were simply too many good birds around! Marsh Harriers cruised around over the reeds and parties of Brent Geese were ferrying backwards and forwards between the open water and their feeding area. A great plethora of ducks fed out on the reserve, along with several busy parties of Dunlin, Oystercatchers and Avocets, while the sound of meowing cats drew our collective attention to the arrival of a number of very smart Mediterranean Gulls.

The last lagoon before the beach held a different range of waders, with a few Bar-tailed Godwits scattered in with larger numbers of Grey Plover, a single Spotted Redshank amongst the Common Redshanks and the additional bonus of several, very smart, Pintails. The tide was well in at the beach and a good number of waders were present, though many were rather distant today. We did, however, add a couple of Turnstones and an active party of Sanderlings, as well as some Red-breasted Mergansers out on the water. On the return leg, we stopped off at one of the hides and enjoyed much better views of the ducks and waders that we had taken a quick look at earlier. We also re-found a Spoonbill that had flown by earlier and watched it actively feeding, with its distinctive sweeping action. The smaller gulls had all moved on and had been replaced by larger Herring and Lesser Blackbacked Gulls as the evening drew on and the birds followed their pre-roost routines.

Day 2

Thursday 3rd March

The early-risers took a stroll on the beach for half an hour before breakfast and got the list off to a flying start. A number of Great Crested Grebes could be seen on the very calm sea and all were well into their breeding finery. Several Fulmars were busily cruising up and down the beach to their nesting ledges and parties of Oystercatchers and Curlews headed inland to feed. Top bird of the walk came in the shape of a chunky Great Northern Diver that was swimming not far offshore.

After breakfast, we headed along the coast to spend the day at the 25,000-acre Holkham Estate. We started with a walk through the deer park, duly noting the Fallow Deer almost as soon as we had entered the gate. Spring was in the air and many species were in song or actively chasing potential partners around the trees. Both Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers were noted and we enjoyed good views of Nuthatch and Treecreeper. For the locals (i.e. the guides!) there was great satisfaction in discovering that the pair of Ravens that had been present for some time had – as hoped – settled down to breed, and a female could be clearly seen on the nest, with the male making regular visits. Raptors started to appear as the day brightened and were to become a continual feature throughout the day. Common Buzzards and Red Kites were almost constant companions from now on and after a boisterous pair of Kestrels, we notched up the first of four Sparrowhawks for the day.

The lake was very busy with large numbers of ducks and geese present. A contingent of Barnacle Geese were the first returning birds of the increasing breeding population that had originated from feral birds (but five on the marshes later may well have been genuinely wild birds). Pochard and Tufted Duck were nice to see, as were our first Little Grebes, all of which were now advancing into breeding plumage. Further round the lake, we came across a busy little spot where two Goldcrests, a Coal Tit and several Long-tailed Tits were showing nicely. We gradually made our way back to the car park and headed down to the visitor centre for lunch. Just prior to lunch, we couldn't resist a first scan of the grazing marshes. Here we found a great sea of Wigeon, Teal, Greylag and Pink-footed Geese and Lapwings, with a rich mix of other birds, including several remarkably showy Snipe and a very endearing pair of portly Grey Partridges.

After lunch, we headed out to the beach, where a 'kettle' of seven red Kites and two Common Buzzards was a fine sight and we were able to compare Meadow and Scandinavian Rock Pipits with each other. Our primary target was the little party of Shore Larks that had been spending the winter here and, after a rather fraught few minutes while they failed to show, we eventually found them lurking in a belt of old samphire sprigs. Eventually they came out into the open and we even enjoyed watching them dust-bathing! A rather long walk ensued as we headed back around the bay and into the dunes, but it was worth it as we sat for a while in the Washington Hide and scanned the marshes. Two Great Egrets and several Hares and Muntjacs were soon found, while a party of Red Deer took a little more in the way of directional skills to get everyone onto them! Yet more masses of ducks, geese, gulls, waders and raptors filled our field of view and we came away with some great memories of this excellent place. All that remained was the final walk back, via more Coal and Long-tailed Tits, Treecreepers, Little Grebes and a smorgasbord of pines!

Day 3 Friday 4th March

Transfer day arrived as we got ready to move from Norfolk's northwest corner to the Broads, but there was plenty of opportunity for birding along the way. We began with a pre-breakfast scan of the sea, which proved to

be a little quiet, though several Fulmars were gliding by and we found a couple of male Red-breasted Mergansers. Though the sea was quiet, there was clearly a movement of birds taking place overhead, with Chaffinches, Linnets and Meadow Pipits clearly showing that spring migration was getting under way. We followed breakfast with a short drive along the coast to the neighbouring village of Holme-next-the-sea, where we used a convenient piece of raised bank to give us great, panoramic views of the area. A flight of Avocets dropped into a nearby pool that was already busy with Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler, while the grazing marshes were bustling with harrier activity – including a Marsh Harrier tussling with a Common Buzzard. A Cetti's Warbler shouted at us but typically remained invisible and the first singing Chiffchaff of the year mooched through the bushes.

Back at the hotel, we checked out and began our eastward journey, travelling along the coast as far as Cley-nextthe-sea. We arrived in perfect time for an early lunch, which was taken with a wonderful view of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve from the visitor centre. While we were eating, a sizeable flock of Brent Geese arrived from the east and dropped into North Scrape for a bath and a careful scan of these birds provided a brief glimpse of the Red-breasted Goose that has been spending the winter here. We hatched a plan to head to the old Coastguards Car Park as soon as we had finished lunch, but before we got started, the birds (or most of them at least) all moved off back where they had come from! Decisions, decisions... whether to continue with the plan, or head after the flock and go to Salthouse... In the event, we chose the latter and it proved to be the right move, as we headed with appropriate haste to the Iron Road, where there was just enough room to squeeze the two vehicles into the tiny car park. Immediately we got out of the vehicles, we picked out the Red-breasted Goose, not too far away on open water, preening itself amongst the brents. What a fabulous bird! The flock moved off to feed on the fields across the road and we headed back to the East Bank for a walk down to the beach. A nice mix of ducks and waders followed, many of which were now familiar to us, but we enjoyed them all nevertheless. The beach itself was very quiet, but we enjoyed more waders on Arnold's Marsh, including some smart Ringed and Grey Plovers, Turnstone and plenty of Dunlin, then we turned up a pair of Bearded Reedlings which proved a little tricky for some but showed themselves to others.

Time to finish our cross-county drive and we made the final leg in good time, arriving at our new base in the Broads in perfect time for tea and cake. With this vital refuelling stop completed, we headed back out onto a private track that we have permission to access and cruised slowly down, checking the grazing marshes on the way. A few Yellowhammers revealed themselves, but we were homing in on larger fayre and eventually – after a bit of a random moment of panic! – we were shortly enjoying a wonderful party of Common Cranes as they fed out on one of the fields. In all, we totalled up 10 birds in the area and as the light began to fade, they all eventually made their way off to their night roost. Shortly after, another group of 10 came cruising gracefully by – but more was to come! An owl was hunting along the main drain and heading straight towards us. Expecting a Barn Owl, we were even more pleased to see what looked like a Short-eared Owl coming our way but, as it turned, the wing pattern and belly markings quickly identified it as a wholly unexpected Long-eared Owl – awesome!! These wonderful events had become impossible to beat and it was time to head back and prepare for some excellent home cooking.

Day 4

Saturday 5th March

Still high on the excitement of yesterday evening, we gave the private farm track another look, though perhaps inevitably it was rather quieter. A small party of Red Deer was lurking under some scrubby oaks and good numbers of Stock Doves were certainly a treat to see, but the heavy grey skies and light drizzle looming seemed

to deter the birds a little. After breakfast, we took a drive out to Ludham, checking a few fields for various things on the way. We ventured out as far as the ruins of St Benet's Abbey, which gave us wide views across the grazing marshes that surround the confluence of the rivers Bure and Thurne. A couple of itinerant Pink-footed Geese had found their way into the local Greylag Goose flock, which gave us a chance to gain a closer appreciation of them. Way out across the marsh, we could see a number of swans, including some with yellow bills, so better views were desired. From another viewpoint, we were able to see some family groups of Whooper Swans and to appreciate these smart birds. Marsh Harriers floated around the landscape as ever, while Chinese Water Deer also seemed to be approaching 'ever present' status.

We continued on our way and headed over to Martham to collect lunch items and use the local facilities, followed by a short drive down to the river. Accompanying a small herd of cows was a party of five Cattle Egrets, which seemed content to have us snap away at them with our cameras as they searched for food around the feet of their hosts. We headed back north and took our lunches with us to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Hickling, where hot drinks were available. As we set off again after lunch, the weather didn't seem too bad, but the northeast wind steadily increased and it became decidedly chilly. We took a walk out to view a portion of Hickling Broad and found a nice gathering of Tufted Ducks and Great Crested Grebes, accompanied by two female Goldeneye. Across on the other side of the reserve at Brendan's Marsh, a mass of ducks gave us plenty to sift through and we turned up a few Pintail among the more expected species. Two Common Cranes flew by very distantly as we began our walk round to Stubb Mill. Seeing both Great and Little Egrets completed the trio of egrets for the day and a single Black-tailed Godwit dropped in to join the Lapwing flock. We then had a very close encounter with some Bearded Reedlings - but not quite close enough, unfortunately. The weather was becoming uncomfortably chilly and the wind had picked up a little, so, although we made it as far as the raptor watchpoint, we decided to head back early and try our final piece of luck back at the private track. This proved to be a good move as we quickly chanced across an adult male Hen Harrier. We continued on to the point where we had seen Common Cranes the evening before and, sure enough, the lure of the waste products from a potato harvest was too good to resist. We found 11 Cranes feeding at the same spot near a neighbouring farm, with another five around and about to give us a total of 16 birds here. A wonderful end to the day – to be followed by superb Lasagne and some amazing deserts!

Day 5

Sunday 6th March

On our last day, we set out to try and find what we could of those elusive little devils that had not fully understood that they were supposed to show themselves off to us this week. Our pre-breakfast walk attempted to seek out better views of a Barn Owl (only two of us had had the briefest of glimpses in the dark previously) and we tried a few likely spots up and down the road, but to no avail. However, a few Yellowhammers, Linnets and Meadow Pipits showed nicely and a herd of Red Deer was seen heading off to their daytime hideaway in the woods. Across the marsh, four Cranes made for a great start to the day, before we headed for breakfast.

With bags all packed and stored away, we headed back out and drove directly to Great Yarmouth to pay a visit to Breydon Water. We noted where some of the Broadland rivers entered this huge landscape and also how only one of them (the River Yare) actually made it to the sea). As we are currently in a cycle of neap tides, the high tide was not particularly high and, while Curlews seemed happy to roost on the saltmarsh, many waders were happily feeding on the mud that wasn't covered. An eye-catching mass of Avocets and Wigeon provided a backdrop for a mass of busy Redshank and Dunlin, amongst which we found a scattering of Black-tailed

Godwits and Grey Plover and a party of four Red Knot (which were certainly not so red at this time of year!). All seemed wonderfully serene until not one, but two Peregrines shook them all up with a low, strafing run, after which they both settled on a convenient tern platform.

We headed back inland and paused for a while at the Trinity Broads to see what was around. A Sunday regatta on one side of the road pretty much ruled out the chance of finding much bird life here, but on the other side of the road, there was a nice scattering of Great Crested Grebes, Coots, Tufted Ducks and a small group of Goldeneye, which included a very smart male in full finery. Onward with our lunches, we headed back to St Benet's Abbey for a second attempt to add the coveted Short-eared owl to our lists. Fate looked the other way again for a while, as our lunchtime sojourn was marred by showery spells. Unperturbed, we sat it out and, as conditions improved again, we headed out to the abbey mound for more panoramic views. Our lengthy wait was not in vain as we enjoyed quite a number of close encounters with several Marsh Harriers, including a very pale (and probably old) adult male. Three Cranes dropped in for a while before drifting off towards Catfield and our third Peregrine of the day put the fear of the Lord into the local Starlings and Lapwings. Common Buzzards began to rise in the sun and tussled with harriers, Carrion Crows and each other, Chinese Water Deer seemed to be everywhere and a few Whooper Swans were still present. It had been an enjoyable (though cold!) visit, but no owl had graced us with its presence. Time to start heading off had crept up on us and we walked back to the car park. Here, the gathering throng of photographers let us know that a Short-eared Owl was actually lurking low in the grass and not too far away - and there it was, quietly snoozing, but also keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings. This was a remarkable way to the end the tour and we took our happy faces back to base for the last time.

Huge thanks from us both to all of you, for making this such a wonderful few days in the Norfolk countryside. The wildlife was fantastic but the group was even more so! We do hope to see you all again very soon...

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Species lists (\checkmark = recorded but not counted, H = Heard only)

		March 22					
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	
Birds							
Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Partridge	Perdix perdix		2				
Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brent Goose	Branta bernicla	✓		✓			
Red-breasted Goose	Branta ruficollis			1			
Canada Goose	Branta canadensis		6		✓	✓	
Barnacle Goose	Branta leucopsis		60+				
Greylag Goose	Anser anser	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus	1	✓	✓	2		
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	1	2	✓	✓	~	
Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus				12	6	
Egyptian Goose	Alopochen aegyptiaca		✓	✓	✓	~	
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Gadwall	Mareca strepera	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	
Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta	6	1	4	3		
Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca	✓	✓	✓	✓	v	
Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	2	8	1	1	4	
Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula	2	✓	· ✓	✓	_	
Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula				2	6	
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator	4		2	_		
Feral Rock Dove	Columba livia		4	∠ ✓	3	_	
Stock Dove	Columba iivia		2		20+		
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	∠ ✓	√	✓		
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	•	· •	·	· /		
Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus	h	•	•	h		
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	h	2	✓	II ✓		
Eurasian Coot	·	3	∠ ✓	∨	∨		
	Fulica atra	3	V				
Common Crane	Grus grus	4		20	18	7	
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	1	6	1	Н		
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus		14	6	√	~	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	√	✓	√	✓	~	
Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta	√	ļ.,	✓		~	
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	
European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria	20		1		~	
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola	✓		10		~	
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula	1		3+		1	
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica	10		1		~	
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa	30		10	1	~	
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	2		1			
Red Knot	Calidris canutus					4	
Sanderling	Calidris alba	15					
Dunlin	Calidris alpina	✓		✓	1	~	
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago		8	1			
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus				1		
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	✓	✓	✓	✓	٧	
Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus	1					
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	· ·	✓	✓	✓	_	

		March 22				
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6
Birds						
Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus	30				
Common Gull	Larus canus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus		✓	1	1	✓
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	2		1	10+	✓
Great Northern Diver	Gavia immer		1			
Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis		10	5+		
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	1				
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis				5	
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		3	12+	✓	5
Great Egret	Ardea alba		2		1	1
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	4	2	3	1	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		4			1
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	2	6	✓	✓	✓
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus		_		1	
Red Kite	Milvus milvus		12	2		
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		10	2+	3	6-
Western Barn Owl	Tyto alba		10	1	3	0-
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco			1	Н	
Long-eared Owl	Asio otus			1	11	
•				ı		1
Short-eared Owl	Asio flammeus		2		4	- 1
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		3		1	
European Green Woodpecker	Picus viridis		h			
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		4	✓	✓	✓
Peregrine	Falco peregrinus					3
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius		4		1	
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	Corvus frugilegus			✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone		✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	Corvus corax		2			
Coal Tit	Periparus ater		✓			
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	Parus major	✓	✓		✓	✓
Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus	Н		2	Н	
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis		✓	✓	✓	✓
Shore Lark	Eremophila alpestris		4			
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti	Н		1	Н	Н
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	Н	✓		✓	
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita			1		
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		2			
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	Н	∠ ✓	✓	√	_
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		✓	→	▼	
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	▼	✓	✓	▼	· ·
Fieldfare	Turdus meruia Turdus pilaris	*	_	· •		_
	Turdus pilaris Turdus iliacus		✓		10+ ✓	
Redwing		LI			,	
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	Н	Н			
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		1			
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	✓	√	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		1			
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus			√	√	✓
Dunnock	Prunella modularis		2	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii		✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis		✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		6	1		1

	Scientific name	March 22					
Common name		2	3	4	5	6	
Birds							
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla	3					
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus				2		
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella	Н		✓	2	4+	
Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus			✓	2	Н	
Mammals							
European Hare	Lepus europaeus		✓	✓	✓		
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	✓				✓	
Eastern Grey Squirrel	Sciurus carolinensis	✓	✓				
Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus	✓					
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus		✓		✓	✓	
Fallow Deer	Dama dama		✓				
Chinese Water Deer	Hydropotes inermis	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Reeves's Muntjac	Muntiacus reevesi		✓	✓	✓	✓	