

The Great British Bird Race – Northumberland

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th – 30th January 2026

Tour report by Andy Bunten



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

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Andy Bunten (leader) with four Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 28th January

Thick fog was the order of the day when three of the group were collected from Alnmouth train station; we drove to our Seahouses hotel to meet our fourth companion. After lunch, we drove a short distance to a small, permanently-flooded area, where we collected several duck species plus a flying Common Snipe, a bird which can be elusive. An extra bonus was three (Pale-bellied) Brent Geese, just discernible through the mist on the far side of the pond.

We went to Harkness Rocks (Stag Rock) next, which can be very good for sea ducks, divers and so on; Bamburgh Castle loomed menacingly out of the fog. Sadly, the combination of heavy seas and thick mist didn't help, but we did find a lively flock of over twenty Purple Sandpipers feeding on the rocks below with Turnstones. We moved to another vantage point, and although we had glimpses of Red-breasted Merganser and Common Scoter, the poor visibility meant we couldn't all see the birds that were likely out there.

Undaunted, we headed to Budle Bay, past fields full of feeding Curlews and Oystercatchers. Here, the mist was starting to lift, and we had great views of Shelduck, Teal, Wigeon and Shoveler, together with Bar-tailed Godwits and Redshanks, while a small flock of Pink-footed Geese flew overhead. Dunnocks and a Wren were hopping about the stone walls but, annoyingly, the Wren remained hidden from the clients!

Down at the causeway to Holy Island we found a mixed flock of Pink-footed and Barnacle Geese grazing in a field, while the mud flats and channels produced more ducks, a Little Egret, Little Grebe and two Whooper Swans. A distant Marsh Harrier flew high as we continued onto the island proper and parked. Fieldfares were in Hawthorn bushes; the light started to fade rapidly. We only added Grey Heron on our brief walk, though one of the group stayed behind with the bus and had a Peregrine fly overhead.

We had to call it a day while peering through the gloom for a Robin; we headed back to our very comfortable hotel to plan for the next day.

Day total = 52 species

Day 2

Thursday 29th January

Breakfast was at 7.30 am and it was just starting to get light; a peer out from the back of the hotel produced more Purple Sandpipers, Eider and Goldeneye sheltering in the harbour from the strong winds, and both Kittiwake and Rock Pipit flipping past.

Our plan today was to get to Boulmer (an excellent wader site) on the rising tide, and to get our timings right we called in to Craster Quarry en route, to try to pick up some passerines. Lots of Blue Tits and Chaffinches were in evidence, but we struggled to get Coal Tit and a solitary Goldfinch with the Chaffinches. Wrens were calling, but remained hidden!

At Boulmer, the tide was doing its stuff, but the wind was picking up in intensity and making things a bit chilly. Lots of Redshanks and Turnstones were feeding just below our vantage point, while Knots and Dunlins roosted on exposed rocks a little further out. The sea had Wigeons, plus Little and Slavonian Grebes; they were just discernible through the telescope and streaming eyes!

As some of the group were starting to turn blue, we decided to head off to Hauxley Nature Reserve; a chance of more passerines and the certainty of scones and coffee were our drivers!

We drove the back route through Amble and found a big flock of grazing geese. They were mostly Pink-footed Geese, but there was also a handful of Russian White-fronteds, and a small group of Greylags. At Hauxley we found various tits (including Marsh) on the feeders, with good numbers of Tree Sparrows and two pairs of beautiful Bullfinches, before we thawed out for lunch, plus scones, in the café.

Our next stop was East Chevington. Normally, this is an excellent place, but the recent rains had made it too full of water, and the wintering Bittern didn't make an appearance. So we cut our losses and went further south to Druridge Pools. This proved much better, and was full of birds: we enjoyed a real spectacle. We added Gadwall, Ruff and Golden Plover to our list, and enjoyed the sight of constantly active flocks of ducks and waders.

The area along the coast here is good for Twite, and we made our way along the dunes in the rapidly failing light. A big flock of Linnets was present and a handful of other birds flipped away; they *might* have been Twites, but they were silent and distant, so they went down as 'maybes'! A Sparrowhawk flew overhead, but again the group had split when it did so; so it didn't reach the criteria for counting!

As darkness descended, we started back to the hotel; but a final treat was in store. A Barn Owl quartered the dunes and flew over our bus: magic!

Day total of new species = 23

Running total = 75 species

Day 3

Friday 30th January

Over our breakfast of poached eggs and carefully-crafted toast, we discussed our tactics. There were still big gaps in our list (including Pied Wagtail!) and we decided to head inland, where we hoped there might be shelter from the strong wind, and where passerines might be lurking.

Our first wooded area proved very quiet, but our second, near St Cuthbert's Cave, was better, partly due to set-aside crops and Pheasant feeders. There were lots of Chaffinches here, and diligent searching turned up a couple of Bramblings, which needed telescopes to pick them out in the monochrome conditions. Red-legged Partridges ran along the woodland edge, and Robins and Coal Tits flicked across the rides to the feeders.

We drove to a couple of other spots, adding Mistle Thrush and a flock of Redwings, before turning coastward again to meet a high tide. At Holy Island causeway we saw lots of ducks and waders, gradually getting closer as the water rolled towards us, and sharp eyes picked out a Red-breasted Merganser half-hidden in a channel.

Then, by popular demand, we visited the Barn at Beal café, where we hoped a Pied Wagtail might be picking around the car park, but to no avail. We did manage to increase our scone tally to four, though, while we sheltered from the wind and intermittent rain.

We returned to Budle Bay, which held good numbers of ducks, but nothing new for us, so we continued to Stag Rock to put in some time trying to find divers, scoters etc. We parked up at a good vantage point, but the heaving seas were devoid of birds. After half an hour or so, we picked out a small flock of Common Scoters, and the occasional Kittiwake, Common Gull and Cormorant put in an appearance. On Bamburgh beach, a group of Sanderlings chased the waves, and we drove back to Seahouses past flooded fields and roads.

Our final stop before 2.00pm was down in Seahouses Harbour, where we hoped there might be some white-winged (Glaucous/Iceland/Mediterranean) gulls. There were none of those, but a group of diving ducks in the harbour included a neat Long-tailed Duck. And all too soon, our time was up!

This was a new Naturetrek venture, and we had all had a great time, seeing some good birds and visiting some lovely cafés! My thanks go to the group for being so friendly and such wonderful companions with whom to go birding.

Day total of new species = 8

Running total = 83 species

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	January 2026		
		28	29	30
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	✓		✓
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	✓		
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 columbianus</i>	✓	✓	
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</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>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			✓
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			✓
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓	✓
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>		✓	
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓		
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		✓	✓
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	✓	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓	✓	✓
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓	
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		✓	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</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>	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓		

Common name	Scientific name	January 2026		
		28	29	30
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓		
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓		
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>		✓	✓
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓		✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	H	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	