

Central Scotland's Winter Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

9th – 13th March 2026

Tour report by Mark Wood



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Tour participants: Mark Wood (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Summary

Our five-day, late-winter trip to east central Scotland was great fun. The weather was a little mixed, with rain, snow, sunshine and wind, but overall it had been quite clement, and had not really hampered our birding efforts. One of the great things about this part of Scotland is the wide variety of different habitats in a very condensed area, meaning high diversity and relatively short drives, maximising time in the field. We visited freshwater lochs and wetlands, coastal bays, beaches and mudflats, farmland, woodland, moorland and mountainsides in our pursuit of wildlife. Several of the species targeted can be difficult to find, but we were successful in getting great views of many good species. Highlights included Golden Eagle, Mountain Hare, Long-tailed Duck, Black Grouse, Red Squirrel, White-fronted Goose, Bullfinch, Dipper and many more.

Day 1

Monday 9th March

After picking up the tour participants on the outskirts of Edinburgh, and a little faff with the rental van, we soon saw ourselves crossing the bridge over the Firth of Forth to the Kingdom of Fife, where we would spend the next two-and-a-bit days. Our first stop was the visitor centre at RSPB Loch Leven, where we had lunch. The café tables are adjacent to windows overlooking the reserve, and we could see large flocks of Pink-footed Geese flying around and feeding in the pastures, with the picturesque Ochil hills as a backdrop.

After lunch, we went along a woodland trail, where we saw at least three Red Squirrels and a collection of birds like Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Tree Sparrow, Coal Tit and Song Thrush. We then visited the wetland hides, where we found many Curlews, Lapwings, Teals, Wigeons, a few Pintails, Shelducks and around the main loch, Coots, Great Crested Grebes and two Great Egrets, which are still a bit of a local rarity. We then had time to stop at Kirkgate on the west side of the loch, where we got good views of Pink-footed Geese; there were several Pochard and Goldeneye on the water. We drove around the north side of the loch and made our way to Markinch. We checked into our first hotel, had dinner, and ran through the plan for the rest of the week.

Day 2

Tuesday 10th March

After breakfast, we set off east to the Fife coast. Our first stop would be at Lower Largo, overlooking Largo Bay in the Firth of Forth. There was a breeze and a bit of chop on the water, making it a tad difficult to get scope views of birds. We walked to the end of the village where we were both elevated and sheltered from the breeze, which made things a bit easier. In the end, we had decent views of many Velvet Scoters, around four Slavonian Grebes, several Long-tailed Ducks, Red-throated Diver and lots of Eiders. Waders included Curlew and Turnstone.

We continued east to Shell Bay and Ruddon's Point. The area was unusually quiet on the wader front, beyond Redshank and Curlew. Out on the water, we had Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, Eider and more Velvet Scoters, and on the saltmarsh we found Wigeon and Little Egret. We continued east, passing through many quaint fishing villages, like Anstruther and Crail, before stopping at the pleasant and more sheltered waters at Kingsbarns. We ate our lunch on the beach while watching Long-tailed Duck offshore, and getting very close views of Rock Pipit.

A little further on, we had a walk around the farmland at Boarhills to look for Corn Bunting. Unfortunately, we couldn't find any, but we did have a flock of maybe twenty Yellowhammer and a huge flock of Linnets, as well as many Skylarks, Jackdaws, Rooks, Reed Buntings and Meadow Pipits. Next, we stopped at the historic city of St Andrews and overlooked the bay here. Many Sanderlings were present, as were groups of Razorbills, and a few Gannets dived for fish. The Fulmars had returned to their nesting cliffs and showed nicely in the scope, and a few Stonechats were in the dunes.

Our final stop of the day saw us head the short distance inland to the head of Eden estuary; along the way we stopped to look at a small flock of Brent Geese in a field. At the estuary, we proceeded to the bird hide, where the tide was coming in. The mud held huge numbers of Redshanks, Curlews, Shelducks and Teals, along with a few Lapwings and Dunlins, and another Little Egret. The sky was beginning to darken now, so we made the thirty-minute drive back to Markinch for dinner.

Day 3

Wednesday 11th March

This morning, we checked out of our hotel and loaded the van, for today we would be relocating further north. A short distance from the hotel we stopped to check some goose flocks by some small lakes. This stop yielded some good views of four White-fronted Geese mixed in with Greylags and Pink-footed Geese. The small lakes held Tufted Duck, Coot, and Little and Great Crested Grebes, and we also got excellent views of a lovely pair of Bullfinches, and our first Chiffchaff.

We headed to the north coast of Fife, making a stop at Tayport. The mudflats held large numbers of gulls, Cormorants, Shelducks and Curlews, but not much else, so we soon moved on to our main destination, the Tay reedbeds. It was another windy day, but fortunately its direction meant we were protected by the mature Beech and Sycamores, and it was actually quite pleasant. Many Reed Buntings were present, but after much waiting no hint of a Bearded Reedling was found. We did, however, manage to get decent views of a pair of Water Rails, after a little patient waiting.

We stopped at a nearby café for lunch, and then drove around the city of Perth to our last stop of the day, the woods at Scone. We spent a few hours here, wandering the mature wooded gardens of Scone Palace, getting nice views of Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Siskin and other woodland birds, but sadly only very brief flight views of several Hawfinches. We then travelled the short distance north to our hotel in Blairgowrie. We checked in and had some downtime; some of the group spotted a Dipper on the River Erich, which runs right by the hotel, before we met again for dinner.

Day 4

Thursday 12th March

Today was looking a bit wet and windy, and we set off under overcast skies. As we made our way into the Angus glens, our first stop was in Glen Moy, where after a short walk we were able to take shelter behind a stone ruin. From here we spotted many pairs of Lapwings and Curlews which were beginning to fill the glen, and a lovely singing Mistle Thrush. Many Kestrels, Buzzards and Red Kites crossed the skies, but best of all were the seven or so male Black Grouse we could see foraging in their lekking area. They showed rather well as they went about their business.

We then headed up the spectacular Glen Clova, with snow adorning the high mountainsides. We had our lunch at the head of the glen, before going for a walk into the forest. We found some Common Frogs spawning in a stream, but as the rain worsened we struggled to find much else, so retreated to the Clova Hotel to have warm drinks by their cozy fire. We then went to Loch of Kinnordy, where we visited a couple of the hides. Water Rails were very vocal, but we couldn't see any; there were many Tufted Ducks, Teals, Gadwalls, Pochards, Whooper Swans and Reed Buntings. Around the reserve, were many signs of the resident Beavers.

We returned to Blairgowrie through an intense snow storm; it accumulated on the ground very quickly. Fortunately, it ended fairly abruptly, and we were able to make one more stop at the Reekie Linn waterfall. The falls were in spate and created a dramatic spectacle, and we also got a great view of a pair of Dippers.

Day 5

Friday 13th March

For our final day, we packed the vans one last time and went north to Glen Shee. Plenty of fresh snow had fallen overnight, and the mountainsides were thick with the stuff. We spotted a large-looking raptor over a hill, and pulled over to check it out. It was indeed a Golden Eagle, and we were all able to watch it for some time. After a while, it drifted away, but it returned with another (immature) eagle, and they engaged in a brief and inconsequential aerial fight before splitting up. We also saw Red Kite, Buzzard and Raven here.

Further up the valley we stopped again to view a large herd of Red Deer grazing high on the mountain slopes. More snow began falling, so we continued to the top of the pass, parking at the Glenshee Ski Centre. The snow was still a little fierce, so we retreated to the café for tea and cake. When the sun came back out, we began scanning the scopes for Ptarmigans. We found several Mountain Hares, including one very close and cooperative animal, and several Red Grouse; again, one pair showed at very close range. A distant White-tailed Eagle was spotted, but sadly did not come in our direction, and we saw many Ravens, but even after much effort no Ptarmigans could be spotted.

With that, it was time to return to Edinburgh, and within two hours everyone was back at the train station or airport to continue their journeys.

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

N=Near-endemic, I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	March 2026				
			9	10	11	12	13
	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			✓	✓	
	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓			
	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>			✓		
	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓		✓		
	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓		
	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		✓			
	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓			
	Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>		✓			
	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓			
	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓	✓			
	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓			✓	
	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓			✓	
	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓				
	Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓		✓	
	Red Grouse - N	<i>Lagopus scotica</i>					✓
	Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>				✓	
	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Red-legged Partridge - I	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓	
	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓		
	Horned Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	✓				
	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓		✓		
	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓			✓	
	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓			
	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓			
	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓			
	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</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>	✓	✓	✓		
	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓			
	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓			

N=Near-endemic, I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	March 2026				
			9	10	11	12	13
	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓			
	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓			
	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓		
	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓			
	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓				
	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	
	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					✓
	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓		
	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				✓	✓
	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>					✓
	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			H		
	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓		
	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓		
	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓				✓
	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓		✓	✓	
	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓		✓	H	
	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	H	✓	✓		
	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓		✓		
	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓	✓	
	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			H		
	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓		
	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			✓		
	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	✓	✓	
	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓		
	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓	✓	
	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				✓	✓
	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓		H	✓	
	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓		✓	
	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓				
	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓		
	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓		✓	
	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓			
	European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓			
	Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			✓		
	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓		
	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓		✓		
	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓			
	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	H	✓	
	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			✓	✓	
	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓			

Mammals

I=Introduced		March 2026				
Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	✓			
Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>					✓
Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	✓				
Eastern Grey Squirrel - I	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>			✓		
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>				✓	✓
Western Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓	✓	

Amphibians

		March 2026				
Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13
Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>				✓	