

Northumberland - Birds & History

Naturetrek Tour Report

19th – 22nd June 2026



Vindolanda



Hadrian's Wall



Bee Orchid



Common Spotted Orchid

Tour report by Andy Bunten



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Summary

The heatwave, which amounted to more like welcome warmth up in Northumberland, gave us some glorious weather for walking, historical delving and wonderful wildlife watching. We visited a number of fascinating sites, including Vindolanda (with its famous writing tablets), Housesteads (with its latrines) and Chesters (with its renowned Roman baths). Each of these sites had wonderful interpretation centres, which helped bring the history of this area alive.

Our walk along Hadrian's Wall featured fabulous crag-top views, some amazing milecastles and turrets, and plenty of uphill and downhill exercise!

Wildlife along and around the wall included Buzzards, Wheatears, Kingfishers, Common Sandpiper, Weasels and Voles, along with orchids and butterflies. Trips to Slaley Forest and Geltsdale added Peregrine Falcon and various warblers, as well as roding Woodcock and moth-catching Nightjars. It was a fabulous four-day jaunt!

Day 1

Friday 19th June

Segedunum and Corbridge

After a pick up at Newcastle station, we made our way straight to Segedunum, in modern-day Wallsend. This recent name tells you what you need to know, although the original wall ended (or began) in Newcastle itself. and this extra element was built a little later to take the structure further east and prevent anyone sneaking across the River Tyne. Segedunum's thirty-metre tower gives a wonderful view down onto one of the most excavated forts on Hadrian's Wall, and a good introduction into the classical layout followed by all fourteen forts along the wall's length. Inside the Roman Gallery, we learned about Segedunum's place in this northern edge of the Roman empire. Exhibitions gave insights to the cavalry barracks, the commanding officer's house, and the shrine of the standards. Exploring outside, we walked around the outlines of the cavalry and infantry barracks, the granary, the hospital and the other key components of a Roman Fort.

Common Whitethroats and Long-tailed Tits moved around the edges of the site, and we found some beautiful Bee and Northern Marsh Orchids. Our final port of call at this site was to see some remains of the wall itself, and to climb up the reconstructed wall to get an idea of just how impressive it would have been.

We next headed west to the attractive small town of Corbridge and its very well-presented information centre, which houses nicely labelled remains of this once vital and thriving Roman Town. The site was occupied longer than any other along Hadrian's Wall, with a fort first established here in the 80s CE, before it grew more widely into a town. Its importance sprang from its location on the junction of Dere and Stanegate Streets, the main roads leading east/west and north/south.

It was lovely wandering around this impressive, rural site, with Swallows and Swifts swooping low under the looming dark clouds, and Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps serenading us. It was soon time to go to the very friendly,

welcoming Beaumont Hotel in Hexham, to settle into our rooms and to have the first of some very impressive meals.

Day 2

Saturday 20th June

Walking the Wall

Today promised to be dry and warm, even though it started out a little damp. After some hiccups collecting our lunch, we set off west to the Roman Army Museum (RAM) and the site of the Magna Fort. The RAM does an excellent job telling the story of Roman soldiers and their life at the edge of the empire, and has very impressive videos and artefacts, including the only surviving helmet crest found in the Roman Empire.

The rest of our day was spent walking along part of the wall, including the most spectacular section going from the RAM eastwards towards Housesteads. It was spectacular, and also including some stiff ascents and descents! We took it steadily as the weather settled into quite a hot and sunny day. There were some impressive sections of wall, milecastles, turrets and fabulous views down into the remnants of the ancient *vallum*, an earth construction at the rear of the wall defining the 'military zone'.

Our walk took us high onto the edges of the crags formed by the Great Whin Sill, a ridge of hard dolerite running east/west and emerging at the east coast to form the Farne Islands, with magnificent views northwards across farmland and forest.

We had an interesting mammal day, with a Bank Vole scuttling past us and then a Weasel joining us on our walk, disappearing into the wall before popping out to stalk us again. The evocative and heart-lifting songs of Curlews and Skylarks accompanied us as we wandered gently along this historic path.

We had excellent views of Wheatears, with young birds perching on the track and wall just in front of us. Buzzards and Kestrels above our heads were doubtless scouring the ground for that Bank Vole, and as we walked through a small woodland more predators, Tawny Owls, made their presence known, with a male and a female calling to each other.

After Great Chesters fort, we found a comfortable area to have our lunch, before resuming our walk with House Martins patrolling cliff edges, Sedge Warblers singing from the sides of small burns, and Redpolls trilling overhead.

By the time we reached Steel Rigg car park, time was getting on and the heat had taken it out of us, so we decided that the call of the Twice Brewed pub (which has its own brewery) was too much to resist: we made our way to its welcoming seats, shade and ale.

Back at the hotel we gathered for another really delicious meal and, afterwards, we took a short drive up into the Hexham 'shire', to search for some crepuscular birds. Initially, it was a multitude of crepuscular midges that found us, but we persevered and had success with a roding Eurasian Woodcock which croaked and 'psissped' its way past us a couple of times. Then the bird we'd really hoped to see appeared: a Nightjar! It flipped and twisted in the dusk down our ride, before disappearing into the night.

Our final sightings were on our drive home, during which a Tawny Owl appeared suddenly on the road in front of us, a Hedgehog scuttled along the verge, and we had the extraordinary sight of dozens of Black-headed Gulls feeding on insects and flying low over an arable field in the deep dusk.

Day 3

Sunday 21st June

Geltsdale and Vindolanda

It was another lovely sunny day in Northumberland as we headed west to the Cumbrian border and the fabulous RSPB upland site of Geltsdale. Geltsdale is a huge area of 5500ha of moorland, blanket bog and woodland, though our morning's walk was only going to cover a fraction of this superb site. Lapwings and Curlews called as we walked along the track towards Stagsike Cottages. The remeandered stream had created some excellent wetland habitat, where we watched Sedge Warblers and lovely male Reed Buntings darting around the rushes and reeds. Buzzards glided past, and a Peregrine Falcon put in a Red Arrows style dash across the sky in the distance. The lake held Coots and Cormorants, while Sand Martins dashed around after insects.

After a brief stop at the small information centre, we walked into the planting project of Bruthwaite Wood Pasture. This wonderful site supports Black Grouse (particularly in the autumn and winter) and many other species of woodland plants and animals. As it matures, it will become better and better. Willow Warblers called from all parts, and Blackcaps sang mellifluously as we walked through the low tree cover. The track was lined with Common Spotted and Northern Marsh Orchids, and various butterflies, including a Dark Green Fritillary, flitted around the glades. We had fabulous views of a flock of Redpolls, their red foreheads shining in the sun as they perched on tree tops.

Back at the car park, we found a perfect site for our picnic lunch, before driving the short distance to the famous Roman fort and excavation site of Vindolanda. This site is famous not only for the wonderful fort and civil settlement, but also for the artefacts that the regular excavations have unearthed, including the famous Vindolanda writing tablets. These two thousand or so documents have given an astonishing insight into the life of the Roman army in the years before the construction of the Wall. We spent a fascinating few hours seeing the remains of the fort and civil buildings, and absorbing the fascinating finds in the museum.

While we relaxed in the café, we found Willow Warbler and Nuthatch, together with Chaffinches and Robins seeking crumbs and a sunbathing Blackbird spreadeagled on a sun-drenched roof.

Day 4

Monday 22nd June

Housesteads and Chesters

Rain was forecast but held off all day: first thing, we went to probably the most famous of all the forts on Hadrian's Wall: Housesteads. Coal Tits and Song Thrushes serenaded us as we walked up the hill towards the classic Roman fort, set out playing card style in front of us. In common with some other forts, Housesteads was an addition to the Wall, forming part of the second plan for the frontier. As we'd seen before there were barracks, headquarter buildings and the commanding officer's impressive house, but pride of place went to the well-preserved latrines, where one could easily imagine the auxiliaries wielding their stick-mounted sponges.

Once again, there was a fascinating information centre, in which one could have easily lingered for hours; however, we had one more site to see, and so we headed off a few miles east, to Chesters.

This fort spent much of its life as the base for the Second Cavalry Regiment of the Asturias, and is situated in a lovely crook of the North Tyne. It has an amazing museum, opened in the 1890s by John Clayton, who filled it with a jumble of finds from Chesters and four other forts once owned by the Clayton family. The bath house is the pride of this site, and nearby we sat and picnicked overlooking the tumbling river. Common Sandpipers called and bobbed on rocks, a Kingfisher was seen dashing by, large fish jumped, and Pied Wagtails flipped up and down after hatching flies.

It was an idyllic way to end our trip, before we drove back to the Newcastle station to start our journeys home.

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

I=Introduced		June 2026			
Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>			✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		H	✓	
European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>		✓		
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓		✓	
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</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>			✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	H	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>		✓		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓		✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		✓		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		H	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	H
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	H	H		
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		H	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	H	✓	✓
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		H	✓	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	H	H	H	H
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>	H			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	H	H
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			H	

I=Introduced		June 2026			
Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			H	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			H	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	H	✓	✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		H	✓	

Mammals

		June 2026			
Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22
Bank Vole	<i>Myodes glareolus</i>		✓		
Least Weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>		✓		

Butterflies

		June 2026			
Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓	✓
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	✓
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		✓		
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		✓		
Dark Green Fritillary	<i>Speyeria aglaja</i>			✓	
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓	✓	✓
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓		
Peacock Butterfly	<i>Aglais io</i>		✓		
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		✓	✓	

Orchids

		June 2026			
Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22
Common Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza fuchsii</i>		✓	✓	
Northern March Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>	✓		✓	
Bee Orchid	<i>Ophrys apifera</i>	✓			
Twayblade	<i>Listera ovata</i>		✓		