

Scotland's Winter Wildlife Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

19th – 25th February 2022



Red Deer



Crested Tit



Snow Bunting

Tour report & images by Oliver Smart



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Tour Participants – Oliver Smart (Leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Summary

The tour was a new venture for Naturetrek - a specialist photographic trip looking to photograph some of the enigmatic and spectacular species in the Scottish Highlands and nearby coastal locations. The weather forecast for the trip was simple horrendous, with the storm of a generation forecast for the Friday, the day before the tour started. As with all tours, you run plan B, C or D as required and even though the worst was over by the Saturday, we were anticipating strong winds, snow, sleet and rain showers throughout our trip. Some reworking was required which made best use of our time and the locations and excellent wildlife we encountered on the tour. The mountains in the winter always look spectacular, but with a large dumping of snow they looked simply magical.

Day 1

Saturday 19th February

The tour started in Inverness with a collection of group members at the railway station, before heading along the coast to Findhorn Bay, Burghead and Hopeman. The choice of locations was aimed at finding some of the winter geese, waterfowl and waders using the waters, harbours and coastal habitats. We timed the visit for high tide and the subsequent few hours as it dropped away. Following storm Eunice, which had ravaged the south of the UK, we were blessed with clear blue skies, a light breeze and fantastic visibility.

Initially Findhorn Bay offered very little along the beach shoreline, but as we turned into the tidal bay, we started to spot some interesting birds. Common Eider, Red-breasted Merganser and female Goldeneye started us off, before our guide picked out a scoter in the bay. And this was not any ordinary one either but a Velvet Scoter to boot! It was actually incredibly close, perhaps within 40m, so we waited patiently along the shingle shoreline as it drifted closer and began hunting what later turned out to be crabs! Grey Seals bobbed like bottles in the bay and a small Greenfinch flock landed in some gorse by the car park. The scoter eventually took flight to re-join the female merganser further up river, so we headed back to the vehicles and relocated to Burghead.

At this prominent point along the coast, we checked the harbour first before exploring the rocky shoreline along the north-eastern tip. Turnstone and at least eight Purple Sandpiper were sitting along the sea-wall. They gradually departed as the tide receded, but we captured some interesting silhouette shots showing their distinct profiles against a warming cloudy sky. On the other side of the ridge waders were enjoying the freshly exposed rocks and Oystercatcher, Redshank and a number of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls joined in. Further out to sea two Red-throated Diver and a number of Common Scoter were visible.

Our final stop of the day was at Hopeman where we scanned the beach for Ringed Plover and six Long-tailed Duck bobbed in and out of view. The sun had sadly disappeared behind ever-increasing cloud cover; however, we'd had the most wonderful afternoon of winter birds.

We checked in to The Ramnee Hotel in Forres before meeting the remaining half of the group. We discussed the plans for the week and in particular the following day and had a delicious three-course dinner with one of the best Sticky Toffee Puddings our leader had ever had!

Day 2

Sunday 20th February

After a filling breakfast we collected our packed lunches and checked out of The Ramnee Hotel and headed in convoy to Tomatin, where we piled into the minibus and made our way along the Findhorn Valley. The scene was beautiful with snow still patchily gripping the mountainsides. The road was much clearer and easy to navigate by taking it slowly. We spotted Dipper and Red-breasted Merganser, and a Red-legged Partridge flew across the road.

The weather already was changing by the quarter of an hour, with wave after wave of sunshine, sleet, rain, snow and buoyed by strong winds. We had decided to try to look for Mountain Hare and in good spirits we started a climb up one of the most reliable mountain slopes. Unfortunately, the weather was just too inclement and the terrain tricky going.

We had unbelievable views looking back down the strath, but ultimately the absence of hares (although our guide located some distant tracks) and the tough conditions forced us to return for lunch. We did, however, enjoy two further Dipper and some goats, one with a kid along the river, but another strong squall passed through, making even holding camera equipment very difficult.

After lunch and getting stuck along the Kyllachy Road (a result of an optimistic opportunity to venture into the mountains once more), digging ourselves out of a slight pickle, we headed to the Rowantree Hotel near Kincaig. We did stop briefly to enjoy some distant Red Deer munching on vegetation on the other side of the valley and the images were actually quite pleasing as the mosaic of snow and vegetation made for very striking naturescapes.

After unloading our gear and checking in to our hotel for the next five nights, we made a dash to Nethy Bridge, where we soon found a small party of Waxwings. We were determined to track down their feeding area but there appeared to be very few berry-laden trees or bushes and the birds remained mobile for the hour or so we spent watching them before they flew over our heads and disappeared out of view.

More rain returned and darkness descended, so we packed up and made our way back to the warmth and enjoyable food at the hotel. Despite the very tricky conditions it was an enjoyable day in the Highlands and with better weather forecast, the hope of something exciting was beckoning tomorrow.

Day 3

Monday 21st February

After a fantastic breakfast, we made our way to Boat of Garten and enjoyed a full morning's walk through the nearby pine forest. The vegetation was mostly Scots Pine with an understorey of heather and bilberry breaking through the remaining patches of snow. The forest appeared quiet, but sporadically small parties of tits appeared, although the Crested variety never made an appearance amongst them! Goldcrest and Coal Tit were by far the commonest birds of the morning, with Great and Blue Tit, Chaffinch, a Jay and a few Blackbird.

We were scouting for something different, yet Roe Deer were all that darted away from us through the forest. At Loch Vaa we briefly spotted Goldeneye, Tufted Duck and a female Red-breasted Merganser, whilst listening to a strange song coming from some pines on a small peninsula. After a few minutes our leader confirmed it was Crossbill, a species that breeds very early in the year, so song was not unexpected.

We continued along our four-mile loop walk and stopped regularly to enjoy the forest sounds and in some places the quietness too. We practiced with our cameras and photographed the trees using a vertical panning technique. This works really well in even subdued light and creates some wonderful patterns and colours. If the conditions were sunnier then shooting on the edge of the wood and capturing the bright foreground trees with background darkness is also a fun technique to try.

Finally, back at the minibus we headed straight to Carrbridge to enjoy lunch outside and also to see the famous 300-year-old packhorse bridge and some wonderful sculpture carvings in the park and residents' gardens. We played around with further techniques for shooting the bridge with blurred water before quickly heading back to the hotel for some additional provisions.

For the afternoon session our leader took us to the Cairngorms Ski Centre where bizarrely with such beautiful scenery we remained in the car park until dusk. We were hoping to locate and photograph Snow Bunting, which are a specialist of these mountain areas. During the winter many birds actually migrate to coastal areas, and are in fact found frequently in East Anglia. However, here, they still enjoy a winter feed and plenty remain. After about 30 minutes a flock of 44 birds passed overhead and dropped down close to the edge of the car park.

We spent the next two hours or more photographing them at very close range, periodically they flushed and flew up and around before settled once more. They were simply unperturbed by our presence and continued to enjoy what food they could find. A selection of immature, female and at least one handsome male bird were amongst them as well as a partially leucistic individual.

Back at the hotel we enjoyed our second amazing dinner and then Oliver went through the first of our Lightroom sessions, this time illustrating the process of downloading, filing and editing.

Day 4

Tuesday 22nd February

Leaving our hotel in good light we were optimistic of a much calmer day. Of course, it never quite works out that way and we were thrown pretty much all weather conditions in eight hours! Our first stop was Lochindorb and we scoured the moorland for birds and spotted several Red Grouse in beautiful fresh plumage. They were mostly close to the vehicle and were enjoyed by everyone as we took plenty of memorable photographs. The loch was quite choppy but a pair of Goldeneye were seen. Otherwise, the moorland was quiet apart from a few Stonechat and the odd skein of geese that flew overhead.

On news of Waxwings in Nairn we made our way to the coast but failed to connect with a small, yet very mobile flock of three birds. We searched the housing estate for any berry-laden bushes but could not track them down on this particular afternoon. Instead of spending time searching for a needle in a haystack, we headed to the harbour to enjoy lunch overlooking the boiling sea where we found a roosting group of Common Redshank and a few Turnstone pottering around. The Redshanks with their bright orange legs huddled together and all facing into the strong wind made for excellent images. As the tide was pushing them further up the beach, they eventually took flight and landed on the harbour wall. This spot also made for some excellent compositions of them all stacked in a neat little row.

After lunch we took the A9 back to Kincaig and then to Uath Lochan. Sleet and then heavy snow started falling, so our attentions switched to landscape photography before a pair of Goldeneye were spotted on one of the lochs and made for a pleasing, albeit distant image. The forest was very quiet and the weather had certainly reduced wildlife activity. After a walk and further topics of discussion, we headed back to the hotel for dinner and some additional tuition on Lightroom from Oliver and a slideshow on wildlife photography.

Day 5

Wednesday 23rd February

The start, middle and end of day five were a force against nature and we battled wind, rain, sleet, snow and the resulting dampness and mud! However, whatever was thrown at us we still managed to enjoy a lovely day in the Highlands. We started at Loch Garten and stood under cover as much as possible whilst we watched and fed the birds from our hands. The dozens of Coal Tits here have been very accustomed to people and a simple outstretching hand will draw in several birds at once; all lining up and waiting their turn. A dash and grab raid are their normal approach; however, some will pause and selectively pick the *right* seed before retreating to the trees to eat it.

There were many Chaffinches here too and the odd brave individual would make the same daunting landing on some unusual perch to grab a free snack. A Great Spotted Woodpecker, Great Tit and Blue Tit also frequented the patch of woodland, however no Crested Tits were spotted during our morning session.

With clothing getting more saturated and fingers starting to lose feeling, we retreated to the hotel to refuel and dry our gear. The afternoon was definitely going to be a highlight of the trip and we wanted to be ready. Shortly before 2pm we took the short drive to the Alvie Estate to be met by Graham, one of the rangers who has worked the 14,000-acre estate for 38 years! We climbed into two four-wheel drive vehicles and headed up into the hills. The higher elevation brought with it a new weather system and soon we were trundling through snow and gushing torrents along the tracks. The pine woodland darkened and the snow showers started almost as soon as we arrived...perfect!

Along with some Sika Deer on our approach, we were here to photograph the few dozen Red Deer that come down off the mountains to feed. They were paused on the hillside, intermingled between the trees, waiting for the call to descend. The many stags prominently walked around, the more diminutive females and juveniles staying close by. The weather was fantastic; a perfect storm. Snow came down in strong flurries and the moderate gusty wind blew it across the moody landscape. A few fallen trees lay scattered in the foreground, with snow a few inches deep still present from the weekend's heavy showers.

Our intention now was to compose all these elements in images that would delight, create a sense of place and ultimately show these majestic beasts in this intriguing wilderness. It was a fantastic 90 minutes of photography as we zoomed in and out, cropped and recomposed, shot fast and shot slow and perfected the artistic capture of a beautiful wintery scene. Simply magic!

After our eventful and tiring day, we returned to the hotel for rest and further refuelling over another lovely dinner and chatter about forthcoming events. Bring on day six!

Day 6

Thursday 24th February

Today our target were three setups for enigmatic species; Red Squirrel, Crested Tit and Red Deer. We awoke to be greeted by heavy overnight snow, covering the landscape and literally making it appear picture postcard style. Once the doors to the van had been unstuck and the windows cleared of snow, we made our way to Loch an Eilein where we met a local wildlife photographer who has a forest hide for Red Squirrels. The group split in two, with one half spending the morning in the hide and the other coming with the leader to photograph Crested Tits.

We walked through the pine forest and spotted many Red Squirrel tracks; thus, the early signs of the animals were that they were definitely about. The number of visits unfortunately were not as many as expected, but one did make an appearance and all the group took some very pleasing images so it was not a complete washout. The second party had better success in open pine woodland with the feeding station for Crested Tits and we enjoyed a fantastic number of visits of these along with Blue, Great and dozens of Coal Tits. A female Siskin made a few visits too and a few flyover Crossbills added to the day list. We used a variety of perches and the birds were simply following us around, perching on the feeder before it was even repositioned! The light started beautifully too with snow showers coming later, making the scene very picturesque indeed.

At the end of both shoots, we headed back to the hotel for lunch, a warm drink and a chance to relax for an hour before our afternoon session, returning to the Alvie Estate. What an afternoon it turned out to be with a similar number of Red Deer visiting, but this time the ground was completely covered in snow and the trees were also covered on one side, the snow sticking to the bark. This gave the impression of a black and white striped woodland, which was a wonderful backdrop to our images. Our leader talked through several shooting techniques and tips for capturing these wonderful animals in the environment, including shooting low to the ground with the foreground so close that it blurs completely, creating a misty effect. We all took hundreds more images to cap off a lovely day in much calmer and enjoyable winter conditions.

We settled into the evening with the daily bird checklist and then enjoyed the last instalment of our guides presentation, which was confirmed a hit by the rapturous applause at the end! It was, however, a good way to bring together many of the discussion topics, ideas and techniques discussed throughout the week together in this final slideshow.

After our last supper we headed off to pack as we had one more exciting revisit to the hides in the morning.

Day 7

Friday 25th February

Our final day in the Cairngorms and we made it a good one with a switched visit to photograph Red Squirrels and Crested Tits. Despite the squirrel activity being lower than perhaps we might have liked, the one individual that came to visit, performed like a true gymnast and model, posing perfectly for plenty of images. The Crested Tit site was incredibly productive too, with at least three birds along with several other species, all of which we were able to photograph extremely well. The overall number of birds present was excellent and even though some of the snow had melted from the previous day, it was still a lovely mixed colour background. We used a number of perches and to make things more wintry, we scattered some of the snow on the perches!

After a pleasant outdoor picnic lunch at Loch an Eilein, we made our way up to Cairngorm to try again for Snow Buntings in better light, connecting with them for an hour before we returned to the hotel. We said our final farewells and headed off south after a great week of Scottish wildlife photography.

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Checklists

Birds (H = Heard only; E = Endemic; I = Introduced)

	Common name	Scientific name	February 2022						
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓		✓			✓
2	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓						
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
5	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓				
6	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓						
7	Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>	✓						
8	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	✓						
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	✓						
10	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓				
12	Red Grouse	<i>Lagopus [lagopus] scotica</i>				✓			
13	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
14	Red-legged Partridge - I	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓		✓			
15	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>				✓			
16	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓			
18	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓			✓			
19	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓					
20	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓			✓			
21	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓			
22	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓			✓			
23	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	✓						
24	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓			✓			
25	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓			
26	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓						
27	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓			
28	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
29	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓		✓			
30	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓						
31	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓					
32	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓				
33	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓					
34	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
35	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
36	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓		✓		
37	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓						
38	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
39	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓					
40	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>					✓	✓	
41	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>						✓	✓

			February 2022						
	Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
43	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
44	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
45	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓					
46	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓			H	
47	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓						
48	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>		✓					
49	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				✓			✓
50	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓				
52	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
53	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓			✓			
54	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓					
55	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
56	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				✓		✓	
57	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		H		✓			
58	European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	✓						
59	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>						✓	✓
61	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓		✓			H	H
62	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			✓		H	H	
63	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓			
64	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
65	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			✓				✓

	I=Introduced, D=Dead		February 2022						
	Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Eurasian Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>		D					
2	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			✓	✓	✓		
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
4	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>					✓	✓	
5	European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>						✓	
6	Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>						✓	✓
7	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	✓						