

Winter Birds of Dumfries & Galloway

Naturetrek Tour Report

14th – 18th February 2022



Svalbard Barnacle Goose by David Huntbatch



Yellowhammer by David Huntbatch



Willow Tit by Susan Jenkins



Slavonian Grebe by Susan Jenkins

Report compiled by Chris Rollie



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Summary

Geographically central in the UK, Dumfries & Galloway is home to the northernmost of southern species and the southernmost of northern species of a whole range of biodiversity, including several birds. The Solway Firth, and Loch Ryan are renowned for their wintering waterfowl, while the mosaic of farmland and low-lying moorland attract a range of raptors in winter, including Hen Harriers. Contrary to some forecasts the weather was largely dry and mild with a few squalls in between, and the group enjoyed a wonderful few days' birding that delivered a total of 101 bird species seen.

In addition to the magnificent Svalbard Barnacle Geese, exclusive to the Solway, wonderful views of relatively scarce Greenland White-fronted and Pale-bellied Brent Geese were enjoyed, together with large numbers of Pink-footed Geese and Icelandic Greylags. The Whooper Swan feed at WWT Caerlaverock was a close-up treat, with a more distant but nonetheless exciting Merlin viewed from the tower hide for over an hour. Barnacle Geese were incredibly close at RSPB Mersehead Reserve, with fine views of other waterfowl including Pintail, and Shoveler. A Peregrine perched obligingly in a recess of Archibald the Grim's impressive 14th century castle on its island in the River Dee, whilst 130 or so Greenland White-fronted Geese and other waterfowl were seen well from a hide at NTS Threave Wetlands Reserve. Then there was RSPB Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve with super views of increasingly scarce Willow Tit and the breath-taking spectacle of around 100 Red Kites swooping down for food at the nearby feeding station.

Loch Ryan was a delight, as ever, with superb views of around 100 Pale-bellied Brent Geese feeding on a field at Wig Bay, whilst on the loch itself the group enjoyed wonderful views of Greater Scaup, Slavonian Grebes, Common Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser and Common Eider close inshore, with divers further out. However, perhaps the highlights for some were at least six gorgeous Long-tailed Ducks. A cracking finale was provided by around 100 Whooper Swans and six Greenland White-fronts, with five brown ringtails and two grey male Hen Harriers flying in to their communal roost at dusk.

Historical attractions in the passing included the Motte of Urr, Sweetheart Abbey, Threave Castle, Southernness Lighthouse, Dervorgilla's Bridge and Dalry Motte. As ever, comfortable accommodation, superb cuisine and hospitality were all enjoyed at the award-winning Clachan Inn, St John's Town of Dalry, and all combined with stunning birdlife and scenery to deliver a truly memorable few days in good company.

Day 1

Monday 14th February

Three of the party were met in early afternoon at the railway station in Dumfries and we were soon heading west towards Galloway and our accommodation in St John's Town of Dalry, a small village nestling among the hills in the Glenkens of Kirkcudbrightshire. A sunny, windy day with scattered light showers encouraged several Red Kites and Common Buzzards to ride the updrafts and a few Belted and Black Galloway Cattle were seen along the way. As we approached the Glenkens towards Balmaclellan the lofty hills of the Rhinns of Kells, with patches of snow, stood out against the dark sky beyond and we were soon meeting the rest of the group and checking into comfortable accommodation at the Clachan Inn.

From there, we drove south through New Galloway and alongside Loch Ken to Grobdale Moor on the hill road between Laurieston and Gatehouse. A bright sky and strong sunshine created an aurora-like rainbow in the moist misty haze to the north. Presently, a fine cock Hen Harrier came hunting by, low into the south-westerly wind, his grey upper plumage with inky black wingtips contrasting beautifully with pure white underparts as he twisted and banked steadily forward. Then it was on to Loch Stroan and the splendid granite viaduct that formerly carried the old 'Paddy line' to Portpatrick before Beeching's infamous railway closures in the mid 1960's. Passing through some of the most ruggedly beautiful country in Galloway, this line was the setting for Hannay's escape in John Buchan's celebrated novel *The 39 steps*. It was also an area favoured by the late wildlife artist and author, Donald Watson, who painted many of his classic Hen Harrier and waterfowl pictures here. As the light faded, we were treated to distant views of at least four harriers, including two grey males, coming in to roost. A great start to the week. Then it was back to the log fire of the Clachan and their superb cuisine and hospitality.

Day 2

Tuesday 15th February

After a hearty breakfast we set off south towards the Solway and its celebrated wintering waterfowl. Approaching the grey granite town of Dalbeattie we slowed to view the Motte of Urr, Scotland's largest motte. RSPB's Mersehead Reserve comprises some 460 hectares of open freshwater, various wetland habitats, managed farmland, merse (saltmarsh), woodland and dunes, together with an additional 700 hectares of intertidal mud and sandflats. The site has good numbers of breeding waders and wildfowl in spring and is home to thousands of Svalbard Barnacle Geese and other northern wildfowl in winter, whilst a traditional arable rotation ensures good numbers of farmland passerines throughout the year.

Assistant Warden Calum welcomed us to the Visitor Centre but told us that, unfortunately, seed and nut feeders had been removed due to the recent outbreak of avian flu that has claimed up to 38% of the Svalbard Barnacle Goose population. However, strikingly close views of several groups of Barnacle Geese were enjoyed along the short walk to the Bruaich hide. Geese have always been relatively more confiding at Mersehead, possibly because rigorous screening of the paths has never been undertaken. Whaups (Curlews) and Lapwing flew past as we walked, whilst early singing Skylarks serenaded us on our way. From the hide we saw an array of waterfowl including good numbers of Pintail, Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler, Mallard, Lapwing and two relatively scarce Gadwall. A few Roe Deer could also be seen about the place, while movement of geese and Lapwing over the site was fairly constant. The back of this hide holds two large murals of waterfowl in wetland painted by well-known wildlife artist, John Threlfall, who once lived on the reserve. The group were greatly impressed by these and indeed they are worth a visit on their own. The other hide, not visited today, holds an earlier and more extensive Threlfall panel.

As we left Mersehead, we picked up a couple of Tree Sparrows with other finches on a hawthorn hedge, then on to nearby Southernness Point and one of Scotland's oldest lighthouses (1748), but where the wished-for high tide was just too high for birds due to the strengthening westerly wind. Undeterred, we continued on to more sheltered Carsethorn and Drum Burn viewpoint for views across the Nith Estuary from where good numbers of roosting Oystercatcher, Curlew, Redshank and Lapwing were seen. Continuing up the Nith Estuary, we were soon passing lofty heather-clad Criffel on the left and the impressive ruin of Sweetheart Abbey on the right. Established in the late 13th century by Lady Dervorgilla, wife of John Balliol, this Cistercian seat gave rise to the name of the adjacent village of New Abbey, which has been so-called ever since. After lunch in Dumfries, we continued on to WWT Caerlaverock for the swan feed at 2pm. Grain is put out twice daily in front of a large,

heated centre, much to the delight of an impressive assemblage of wildfowl and admiring visitors. The wildfowl are truly wild, and many have come from as far as Iceland and Arctic Russia to take advantage of this welcome provision. Dozens of Whooper Swans were the presiding stars, with a supporting cast of Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Moorhen and a few Tufted Duck, whilst opportunist Yellowhammers pilfered what grain they could.

From the eastern tower hide we enjoyed a marvellous elevated all-round panorama of the reserve and good views of Pink-footed and Barnacle Geese, but the highlight for many was a magnificent female Merlin, which perched obligingly atop a fencepost for the duration of our visit. We ended the day in the Folly Pond Hide, where we were treated to a pre-dusk fanfare from Whooper Swans, a fine backdrop to close views of Teal, Shoveler, Whaup, Lapwing and Wigeon, plus two Black-tailed Godwits. The drive back through Dumfries offered a glimpse of Dervorgilla's Bridge over the River Nith, Scotland's oldest multiple arched bridge (under construction in 1431). A warm fire and another superb dinner at the Clachan were enjoyed by everyone.

Day 3

Wednesday 16th February

Red kites circled low over the village as we emerged from the Clachan dressed for the forecast wet and stormy weather. In the event it turned out better than expected and we were able to see out the worst of the showers in the low hide at Blackpark Marsh at National Trust for Scotland's Threave Wetlands Reserve near Castle Douglas.

We picked up a pair of Stonechats and Reed Bunting from the track, whilst a Peregrine perched obligingly in a high sheltered recess in one of the corners of Archibald the Grim's magnificent 14th century square castle tower, affording decent telescope views. Presently, good views were also had of about 130 Greenland White-fronted Geese with distinctive black bars on their bellies and white surrounds to the bases of their orange bills. There are two small flocks of these near globally-threatened and scarce geese in Galloway, but which can be very elusive. Better views were obtained from the low hide and we could see that at least one individual had a satellite tagged neck collar. Blackpark Marsh, in the foreground, held hundreds of ducks including Wigeon, Shoveler and Teal. A Red Kite was seen feeding on a carcass on a small island in the flooded marsh, whilst large numbers of Pink-footed Geese could be heard behind us and which ultimately proved to number over one thousand.

From Threave we soon covered the few miles back up the River Dee towards RSPB's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve, stopping several times to view and photograph very close groups of Greylag, Pinkfeet and Canada Geese. The open water and marshes here and at Threave are designated Special Protection Areas under the European Birds Directive on account of their important populations of wintering Greenland White-fronted and Icelandic Greylag Geese. An attractive single-track road took us the mile or two to Laurieston and nearby Bellymack Hill Farm Red Kite Feeding Station, where we arrived in good time to enjoy our packed lunches, refreshments and cakes in the spacious visitor centre, before feeding time at 2pm.

The feeding station had modest beginnings and was established back in 2003 as part of the highly acclaimed and award-winning Galloway Kite Trail, established by the RSPB in partnership with Forestry Commission and local businesses, with funding support from Scottish Natural Heritage etc. Such has been the success of the project that the original hide was extended and eventually replaced with the visitor centre, in front of which owner Anne Johnstone puts out scraps of meat for the kites at 2pm on nearly every day of the year. The ensuing spectacle is simply spellbinding as over 100 Red Kites come swooshing down to deftly grasp these morsels and sweep back up in a succession of mesmerising dives. When not actively engaged in this amazing tumbling display, provided

there is some wind as there certainly was on this occasion, the kites hang effortlessly overhead calling to each other. With the sky clearing the light improved and delighted photographers, whilst others enjoyed a lovely Grey Wagtail about a small pigsty beside the visitor centre.

Unfortunately, both hides at RSPB Ken-Dee were closed for structural repair, but as this site is the best in Scotland for Willow Tit, we went in to check the nut feeders which often attract them. We were in luck and a single, beautiful Willow Tit was seen well, together with Nuthatch, Coal, Blue and Great Tits. A twenty minute or so drive then saw us back and relaxing before more delights from the Clachan's celebrated dinner menu, including Kirkcudbright scallops and Lewis mussels.

Day 4

Thursday 17th February

A storm overnight gave way to a dry morning with calling Red Kites and trilling Greenfinches as we left the Clachan and headed west towards Loch Ryan by Stranraer. From New Galloway we took the Queen's Way which follows the route of the old Edinburgh to Portpatrick road, one of the ancient pilgrims' ways to Whithorn. Near Clatteringshaws Loch we stopped to admire a Woodcock on the road. It was very obliging and gave rare views of its long, flexible bill, head bars and strikingly patterned plumage, normally cryptic, but not on the road! Any lingering rain had cleared by our crossing of the River Creel into Wigtownshire. Stranraer seafront in a strong westerly wind and very high tide was uncharacteristically quiet with only a few Turnstones around Bishop Burn outlet, which can be heaving with waterfowl under different conditions. However, fine big flocks of Whaup and Lapwing were seen resting up on a field behind the shore at nearby Innermessan.

To find sheltering birds we took to the western side of the loch, Scotland's only significant shallow sea loch and a renowned birding spot throughout the year. We were immediately rewarded with stunningly close views of Red-breasted Mergansers, Greater Scaup, Common Scoter, Common Eider, Shags and several Goldeneyes. Some of the mergansers were displaying, whilst the scoters were actively diving to feed underwater. Meanwhile, the scaup, in a raft of 30-40, were resting on the surface, some with their heads buried in their backs, but with sufficient of them more alert and providing simply wonderful views of both males and females of a species which is often very difficult to see well on the seas around the UK.

A few Great Crested and Slavonian Grebes were also seen well, whilst one or two of the latter came close enough to reveal their bright red eyes. A single Black-throated and several Red-throated Divers completed the spectacle before we moved on up the western side of Loch Ryan to Wig Bay, where we immediately picked up at least six magnificent Long-tailed Ducks, mostly males, plus a few more Eider and Slavonian Grebes. A short walk out to Wig Scar was rewarded by a group of around 100 Pale-bellied Brent Geese, a delight especially for the photographers in the group. A distant flock of small bouncing passerines were probably Twite, but too far away to be sure.

Lunch at Driftwood Café by Stranraer Marina was as popular as ever, then it was back to the western shore of the loch for more grebes and sea ducks in the strong sun and shelter of the slope behind. As the light faded, we headed for a nearby Hen Harrier roost, taking in a couple of freshwater lochs on the way. A big flock of over 100 Whooper Swans stood out in a bright green field, whilst six Greenland Whitefronts were picked out by a sharp-eyed member of the group. Stonechats, a hovering Kestrel, Ravens and Roe Deer comprised pre-roost attractions, but at about 1620 the first Hen Harrier arrived, a big female which put up a grey adult male, which

was evidently already in the rank vegetation of the roost. Presently, another grey male harrier arrived and interacted with the first, whereupon another brown ringtail arrived to join the fray and at one point all four were gliding back and forth over the roost. In all we saw at least two grey males and five ringtails. One of the latter, a glorious big female, was perched on a distant fencepost, affording fine telescope views of its tail bars and owl-like face. We stayed on for a few more minutes, savouring the open landscape and natural wildness of the habitat before us, the low light seemingly accentuated by the yellow Molinia grass. Then it was back to the Clachan in the hope of some unsampled delights remaining on the menu!

Day 5

Friday 18th February

This was our last day and we enjoyed a slightly later breakfast to facilitate packing and checking-out etc. Almost miraculously, given the week's weather forecast of yellow and amber warnings (red in southwest England), today dawned dry and bright and we were soon strolling through a lofty lime tree avenue to the kirkyard overlooking Water of Ken, just behind the Clachan, with views to the oak woodlands of Garroch Glen and the snowclad Rhinns of Kells hills beyond. Various historical features were interpreted while several Red Kites and the village Jackdaws floated around noisily.

From there we drove a mile or so up the attractive glen and set off on a circular walk through Garroch Oak Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest. Following a brief chat with shepherd Drew, a Wren sang loudly through a developing shower, hinting of spring. On Drew's advice we continued up the glen a wee bit further and were immediately rewarded with our first Jays of the week, but unfortunately no Dipper was seen or heard on this favoured stretch of Garroch Burn. Equally there was no sign of Pied Wagtail, but which irritatingly was reported about the school playground on several days this week. Two that got away.

Back at the Clachan we offered our respective thanks and farewells to our hosts and the group members travelling under their own steam, whilst the three rail travellers were taken back to Dumfries, where trains were apparently running to Carlisle but no further due to storms in the south. A few more Red Kites and Buzzards were seen along the way, but the highlight was a brief stop on the Whitesands in Dumfries to view eight Goosanders, including a few splendid males, below the cauld (weir) and Dervorgilla's medieval red sandstone bridge on the Nith. So ended a marvellous week of birding in good company and comfortable accommodation, with excellent dining in the Clachan Inn. Thanks to the staff of the latter for their hospitality and delicious food, and of course to all the group for making this such an enjoyable holiday.

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; c= circa)

I=Introduced		February 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
Red-legged Partridge - I	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓	✓			
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pale bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>				✓	
Canada Goose - I	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		✓			
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓	c1000	✓	
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>			c130	6	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓			
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓		
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		2	1		
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓			
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓		
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓		✓	
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>				✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				✓	
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>				✓	
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				6	
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓			✓	
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			✓		✓
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				✓	
Feral Pigeon - I	<i>Columba livia var. domestica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓		✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1		3	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				✓	
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>				✓	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Black--tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		2			
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓		✓	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>				1	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		✓	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				1	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		3	1		
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓

I=Introduced		February 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				✓	
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				✓	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓	
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>				1	
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>				✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓		1	1
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2		1	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		4+		7	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	100+	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓			
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	1	1	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1		
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</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>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			1		
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓		✓
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			✓		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓		
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			2	2	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓			✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓			
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓			
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1		
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓		
Eurasian Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓	✓		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓			✓
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>			1		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓			✓

I=Introduced		February 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				✓	
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓			
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓		

		February 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					
European Hare	<i>Lepus eurpaeus</i>		1	2	2	
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mole	<i>Talpa europea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>				1	
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				1	

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