

Winter Birds of Dumfries & Galloway

Naturetrek Tour Report

14th – 18th November 2022



Red Kite at Bellymack Hill Farm



Greater Scaup on Loch Ryan



Tree Sparrow at RSPB Mersehead



Whooper Swan at WWT Caerlaverock

Report compiled by Chris Rollie, images by Ross Bishop



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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. Apart from the first morning of torrential rain the weather was largely dry and mild, though cooler towards the end of the week, and the group enjoyed a wonderful few days' birding that delivered a total of 100 bird species (including Water Rail, heard only).

In addition to the magnificent Svalbard Barnacle Geese, exclusive to the Solway, wonderful views of Pale-bellied Brent Geese were enjoyed, together with relatively scarce Greenland White-fronted, Pink-footed Geese and Icelandic Greylags. The Whooper Swan feed at WWT Caerlaverock was a close-up treat, with a more distant male Hen Harrier viewed from a hide for half an hour as it successively perched up and foraged around. RSPB Mersehead Reserve delivered fine views of additional waterfowl including Pintail, Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler, plus stunning views of Tree Sparrow and Yellowhammer. A Peregrine was seen briefly on a parapet of Archibald the Grim's impressive 14th-century castle on its island in the River Dee, but more obliging were a group of Greenland White-fronted Geese and at least three scarce Willow Tits at NTS Threave Wetlands Reserve. Then there was the breath-taking spectacle of around 100 Red Kites swooping down for food at Bellymack Hill feeding station, followed by distant views of two ringtail Hen Harriers tussling with four Ravens, immediately followed by a brief but unmistakable Golden Eagle put up by one of the harriers.

Loch Ryan was a delight, as ever, with superb views of Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Greater Scaup, Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes, Common Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Red-throated Divers and Common Eider close inshore. However, perhaps the highlight for some was at least nine gorgeous Long-tailed Ducks in Wig Bay. A cracking finale was provided by some eight Hen Harriers flying to and over their communal roost at dusk.

Historical attractions in the passing included Parton Privy, the Motte of Urr, Sweetheart Abbey, Threave Castle, 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 November

Four 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 bright but windless day meant that Red Kites and Common Buzzards were mostly perched up, but there were a few Belted and Black Galloway Cattle along the way. After meeting the others and checking into comfortable accommodation at the Clachan Inn, we were soon on our way south through New Galloway to Loch Ken, where we stopped to look at a group of both male and female Goosander, plus a Cormorant and Grey Heron. By now the sky was completely overcast and dull, but the Goosanders were close enough to provide fine views.

Then it was on to Loch Stroan and the splendid granite viaduct that formerly carried the old 'Port Road' railway or '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 three grey male harriers, and the hint of a ringtail, 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 November

After breakfast we set off south in heavy rain towards the Solway and its renowned wintering waterfowl, stopping briefly at Parton to view its listed Edwardian privy, then again to view a group of around 100 alert Icelandic Greylags close to the road. 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. It 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.

In torrential rain the visitor centre was extremely welcome, and its feeders immediately provided stunning views of at least six Tree Sparrows and two Yellowhammers. Pintail, Teal and Shoveler were among the waterfowl on the water in front of the centre, and several groups of Lapwing were about. Avian flu has claimed up to 38% of the Svalbard Barnacle Goose population and only a few were seen from the Bruaich hide, but from here we did see good numbers of Pintail, Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler, Mallard, Lapwing, a few Roe Deer and a Brown Hare, sitting out the rain, which was now coming into the hide horizontally from the east, an unusual direction for here. The hide has two large murals of waterfowl in wetland by well-known wildlife artist, John Threlfall, who once lived on the reserve. All were impressed by these and indeed, they are worth a visit on their own.

With rain still falling heavily, we drove up the Nith Estuary and past the impressive ruin of Sweetheart Abbey. 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. We continued on to WWT Caerlaverock for lunch and the swan feed at 1pm. 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 a Grey Wagtail trotted about on the water's edge as the rain stopped for the day.

From the Saltcot Merse Observatory we enjoyed an elevated view of the merse and wet fields behind the sea wall. Distant groups of Barnacle Geese, Shelduck, Oystercatcher, Roe Deer, Little Egret and a lone Great Egret were seen, but the highlight was a magnificent adult grey male Hen Harrier, which displayed its low foraging technique, interspersed with periods of perched preening, and all within view as the sun fell on the Lakeland fells to the south. We ended the day in the Folly Pond Hide, with the characteristic pre-dusk fanfare from Whooper Swans, a fine backdrop to close views of Teal, Shoveler, Whaup (Curlew), Lapwing and Wigeon, plus at least three Snipe. A warm fire and another superb dinner at the Clachan were enjoyed by everyone.

Day 3

Wednesday 16th November

A fine morning saw us heading south to National Trust for Scotland's Threave Wetlands Reserve near Castle Douglas, where we were soon among the birds, including Fieldfare, Redwing, Song Thrush, Blackbirds, Reed Buntings and Chaffinches, whilst around 100 Pink-footed Geese drifted over, and a Raven gave brief chase to a male Goshawk. From a rise overlooking the swollen River Dee, some spotted a Peregrine atop Archibald the Grim's magnificent ruined tower (14thC). A delightful riverside walk along the flood bank was alive with small passerines, but we stopped to scope distant 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 both can be very elusive.

Flooded Blackpark Marsh in the foreground held hundreds of waterfowl including Whooper Swans, Wigeon, Mallard, Pintail, Shoveler and Teal. Red Kite and Buzzard circled here and there, but our progress towards Meikle Wood Hill was halted abruptly by the unmistakable 'electronic' buzzing contact call of Willow Tit, which obligingly perched up on various mossy boughs and a fence wire on the woodland edge. The fastest declining bird in the UK, this was a major target species for several in the group and we got lucky, with a further two or three individuals moving through flood bank scrub as we retraced our steps due to ongoing maintenance work on the tracks and hides.

From Threave we went back up the River Dee to RSPB's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve, stopping to view very close groups of Greylag 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. Sadly, both hides at RSPB Ken-Dee are still closed and awaiting essential maintenance, whilst a fallen Beech blocking access curtailed our visit even further. Two calling Ravens circled low overhead as if to mock our misfortune. 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, before 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, the kites hang effortlessly overhead calling to and chasing each other.

With daylight still good approaching dusk, we opted to drive over the hill road towards Gatehouse-of-Fleet, where we looked down over Fleet Basin regionally scenic area to the Murray Isles in the Solway Firth and Isle of Man beyond. We then became aware of a group of four Ravens swirling over a far ridge, interacting with first one and then two ringtail Hen Harriers. Remarkably, they initially confined their activity to a restricted area, allowing everyone to see them very well through the telescope. Eventually, one of the harriers drifted along the skyline and put up a magnificent adult Golden Eagle, which slowly glided along the skyline one way and then the other before disappearing through a gully. A wonderful end to our day, and followed by another superb dinner.

Day 4

Thursday 17th November

Light rain arrived overnight and dampened our chances of seeing much birdlife in the village. However, we were soon on our way to the head of Loch Ken, where a Great Northern Diver had been reported. There was no sign of it today, but clearer conditions to the north allowed fine views of the Carsphairn Hills. From there we headed west towards Stranraer and Loch Ryan along the Queen's Way which follows the route of the old Edinburgh to Portpatrick road, one of the ancient pilgrims' ways to Whithorn, the birthplace of Christianity in Scotland. We stopped briefly at Craigmews to look at the interface and contrast between grey granite and metamorphosed greywacke, a striking geological feature. Skies were brighter to the west, and we had little or no rain thereafter.

Following a comfort stop in town, we drove down to Bishop Burn on Stranraer seafront, which was alive with a variety of close waterfowl, including good numbers of Greater Scaup, Wigeon, Red-breasted Merganser, Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Turnstone, Oystercatcher and Redshank, with a few Dunlin and Curlew. No scarce gulls were spotted, but lots of Common, Black-headed and Herring Gulls, with a single Great Black-backed Gull. A little offshore we could see a few Eider Duck, Cormorant and Shag, while a bit further east by Balyett we picked out Ringed Plover, Shelduck and Mute Swan amongst the throng.

Loch Ryan is Scotland's only significant shallow sea loch and a renowned birding spot throughout the year. From Innermessan, south of Leffnoll Point, we had cracking close views of several Slavonian Grebes, male and female Common Scoter, Red-throated Divers, Eider, Shag, Great Crested Grebes, Mergansers and Cormorants. Some of these views were lifetime bests for the group, and of some species which are often very difficult to see well on the seas around the UK. A late Sandwich Tern fishing close inshore was a nice surprise.

Lunch at Driftwood Café by Stranraer Marina was as popular as ever, then it was up the western shore of the loch to Wig Bay, where we were immediately rewarded by at least nine striking Long-tailed Ducks, with eight together in the scope at one time. There were more Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes, Pale-bellied Brents and waders, but perhaps the highlight was a large group of frantically feeding Curlew on a knowe (knoll) just behind our car park, which also had three Black-tailed Godwits, whilst a lone Bar-tailed Godwit was spotted resting on the shore. A short walk along the bay delivered good views of Stonechat, but no Twite today.

As the light faded, we headed for a nearby Hen Harrier roost, taking a slight detour in the hope of seeing Greenland Whitefronts. Although we didn't see any there, a lively Roe Deer got up from the roadside and bounded away through a fodder crop, obligingly putting up a Woodcock in characteristically steep ascent. On arrival about 4.10pm, a group of Greenland Whitefronts was scoped in a field beyond the roost, and there was already an adult grey male Hen Harrier drifting low over rushes. Presently there were two and then three grey males all seen together, one of them dropping into the rank vegetation of the roost. A big female harrier arrived and disturbed the male, which joined his fellows in flight over the roost area. Presently, another brown ringtail harrier arrived and interacted with the others, and at one point some five or six harriers were gliding back and forth over the roost. In all, we reckoned we saw four grey males and three or four ringtails, a wonderful spectacle and fitting climax to a super day in the far west. Throughout all this, a pair of Ravens sat silently on a fence line in front of us, as if enjoying the spectacle as much as we were, but without our appreciative whoops of delight. Heavy rain came on as we headed back east but that didn't really matter following such a super day and with dinner at the Clachan still to come.

Day 5

Friday 18th November

This was our last day, and we enjoyed a slightly later breakfast to facilitate packing and checking-out etc. We began a bright, dry day by 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, but sadly the impressive Rhinns of Kells hills were shrouded in mist. Various historical features were interpreted while several Red Kites floated around.

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. We thought we were on 94 bird species for the week, but I had initially omitted to tick off Magpie on the checklist trip column, so we were actually on 95. Nevertheless, a total of 100 for the week now seemed most unlikely. However, we had only walked a short distance when our first Sparrowhawk flew over the wood, and we were soon hearing snatches of Nuthatch calls and a Goldcrest flitted about in the oak canopy overhanging the road – both were also new for the week. With lots of yellowing and golden leaves still on these sheltered trees it was glorious to walk along the track and take in the sights, sounds and scents of autumn splendour. A large walled garden gave another fleeting view of Nuthatch and a perched Siskin atop an apple tree, initially misidentified as a Lesser Redpoll on account of the latter's trill being heard nearby. We stopped to admire a two-hundred-year-old Douglas Fir, reckoned to be one of the oldest in the UK, while Long-tailed Tits moved through the trees and two Treecreepers flew across in front of us - always rather odd looking in level flight from below.

A brief stop over the tumbling Garroch Burn failed to deliver Dipper, and we were soon back at the Clachan to offer our respective thanks and farewells to our hosts and those group members departing under their own steam, whilst the four rail travellers returned to Dumfries Station. A few more Red Kites, Buzzards and a male Sparrowhawk were seen along the way, but the highlight was reserved for travellers on a later train, as we had time to drop down to Kingholm Quay on the Nith and were immediately rewarded by at least six Goldeneye, our 100th bird species for the week. A fine flight of Pink-footed Geese got up from the fields on the far side of the river, as an immature Grey Heron stood sheepishly on the far bank. Reed Buntings called, and a pair of Stonechats showed atop some tall grasses, and 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.



In Garroch Glen, Kells, by Chris Rollie

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H= heard)

I=Introduced		November 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
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>		2	✓		✓
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>			✓	✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓		✓	
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓	✓		
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓		✓	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓		
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>				9	
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>					6
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	3		✓	✓	
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>				✓	✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			1H		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			1		
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				✓	
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auratus</i>				✓	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		✓	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		✓	
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>				1	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				3	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>				2	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>		✓		✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓	✓	✓
Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		2		1	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		✓	

I=Introduced		November 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>				1	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓	
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>				✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓			✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓		✓	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓			
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					2
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	3+	1	2	8	
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>			1		
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1		
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓		✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>			✓	✓	
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloesus 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>		✓			✓
Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			3		
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>		✓	✓	✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		6+			
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2		1	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrelli</i>			✓	✓	✓
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>		✓	✓		
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>					1

I=Introduced		November 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citronella</i>		2			
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓		✓

Mammals		November 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					
European Hare	<i>Lepus eurpaeus</i>		1			
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>		1			
Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>					
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>				1	

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