

# The Winter Birds of Dumfries & Galloway

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 17th November 2023

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Whooper Swans



Red Kite



Svalbard Barnacle Geese



Female Goosander

Tour report by Chris Rollie. Images by Ruth Lawrence

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Tour participants: Chris Rollie (Leader) with six Naturetrek clients

## 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. Cool throughout, heavy showers characterised the first two days, followed by a dry but dull end to the week in which the group enjoyed a wonderful few days' birding that delivered a total of 102 bird species.

In addition to the magnificent Svalbard Barnacle Geese, exclusive to the Solway, wonderful views of Pale-bellied Brent Geese were enjoyed, together with Pink-footed Geese, Icelandic Greylags and relatively scarce Greenland White-fronted Geese. The Whooper Swan feed at WWT Caerlaverock was a close-up treat, followed by a super session in a nearby hide on the edge of merse (saltmarsh), from which we saw a foraging adult male Hen Harrier and a delightful adult Jack Merlin perched atop a willow. In addition to incredibly close views of Svalbard Barnacle Geese, RSPB Mersehead Reserve delivered Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, several hundred Lapwing and Tree Sparrow. Following a tip-off, we stopped at Dock Park in Dumfries to watch around eight Waxwings feeding on Rowan berries. A Peregrine watched us from a parapet of Archibald the Grim's impressive 14<sup>th</sup> century castle on its island in the River Dee, immediately followed by our fleeting glimpses of an Otter as it made its way upstream. Around 75 Greenland White-fronted Geese and two scarce Willow Tits were seen on NTS Threave Wetlands Reserve. Then there was the breath-taking spectacle of around 100 Red Kites swooping down for food at Bellymack Hill Red Kite feeding station.

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 Mergansers, Red-throated Divers, Common Eider and various waders all close inshore. An obliging Barn Owl flew right overhead at one point, and a cracking finale was provided by at least four 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 and Dervorguilla's Bridge, Scotland's oldest multiple arch bridge. 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 13th November

Two 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. Red Kites, Common Buzzards, a few Belted and Black Galloway Cattle were seen 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 female Goosander.

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. Our luck was in and, as the light faded, we were treated to distant views of a brown ringtail and an adult male coming in to roost. Then it was back to the log fire of the Clachan and their superb cuisine and hospitality.

## Day 2

## Tuesday 14th November

After breakfast we set off south towards the Solway and its renowned wintering waterfowl, stopping briefly at Parton to view its listed Edwardian privy. 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.

The visitor centre feeders immediately provided close views of Great Spotted Woodpecker and various tits and finches including a lone Tree Sparrow. Pintail, Teal and Shoveler were among the waterfowl on the water in front of the Bruaich hide, while several hundred Lapwing flew here and there overhead. 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. However, it was perhaps the extremely close views of Svalbard Barnacle Geese that impressed most. RSPB have never attempted to screen the fields at Mersehead and this means that the geese are relatively confiding.

From there, we drove up the Nith Estuary and past the impressive ruin of Sweetheart Abbey. Established in the late 13th century by Lady Dervorguilla, 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. With news of Waxwings around, we stopped at Dock Park in Dumfries and enjoyed close views of around eight of these colourful winter visitors. On to WWT Caerlaverock for lunch and the swan feed at 1pm, when grain is put out 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. With exceptionally mild conditions in the far north, numbers of Whooper Swans are much reduced this autumn, but a supporting cast of Mute Swans, Canada Geese, Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Moorhen and a couple of Tufted Ducks swelled the waiting flock.

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, Redshank, Roe Deer, Little Egrets and two Great White Egrets were seen, plus an adult grey male Hen Harrier foraging low over the merse. However, perhaps everyone's highlight was a scope-filling view of a stunning adult male (Jack) Merlin, perched atop a Saugh (willow) bush. 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 a lone Snipe. A warm fire and another superb dinner at the Clachan were enjoyed by everyone.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 15th November

A dull morning saw us heading south to National Trust for Scotland's Threave Wetlands Reserve near Castle Douglas, where we were initially confined to the vehicle by torrential rain. A few Fieldfares, Redwing and Blackbirds were seen along the path to the River Dee, and the sound of squealing pigs indicated Water Rails in the riparian marsh. However, the rain returned with a vengeance and hurried us into the recently refurbished and spacious lower hide overlooking Blackpark Marsh, which held hundreds of waterfowl including Whooper Swans, Wigeon, Mallard, Pintail and Shoveler. A Heron, Red Kite and Buzzard sat out the rain and seemed in a different world to the waterfowl revelling on the water. Unfortunately, we didn't see or hear Willow Tit, and neither were there any Greenland Whitefronts on their favoured feeding fields. However, the rain cleared and we retraced our walk back along the Dee to the vehicle, where we saw a big flock of some 500 Pink-footed Geese come in to land on the far side. A Raven perched obligingly atop an Ash and provided great viewing through the scope as it preened with its enormous bill.

From Threave we went back up the River Dee to RSPB's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve, passing very close groups of Greylag and Canada Geese, but still no Whitefronts. The open water and marshes hereabouts 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. So, it was on to Laurieston and nearby Belymack Hill Farm Red Kite Feeding Station, where we arrived in good time and weather to enjoy our packed lunches and refreshments outside 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 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 a 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. After the Kites had their fill, a Saker Falcon flew onto and underneath the feeding table to devour remaining scraps. Un-ringed and with no jesses, this escapee is well known to local falconers and has been attending the feeding station for some weeks. Marginally bigger than a female Peregrine, this was a bonny bird and offered great views.

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. A brief stop delivered a distant flock of Golden Plover, swirling over high moorland, but nothing more. We ended the day by walking to the goose platform at RSPB Ken-Dee Reserve, but still the Greenland Whitefronts eluded us, as did Willow Tits.

## Day 4

## Thursday 16th November

The prospect of a dry day and the waterfowl delights of Loch Ryan saw us leave the Clachan in good spirits, in the earnest hope that thick fog would soon lift. 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. Clatteringshaws Loch and the high hills beyond were lost in fog, but we stopped briefly at Craigdews Hill to look at the interface and contrast between light grey granite and darker metamorphosed greywacke, a striking geological feature. Goats have roamed Galloway's hills since neolithic times and several were seen in the wild goat park there. As if by magic, though not before time, the fog cleared and the hills emerged beneath a grey sky.

Following a comfort stop in town, we drove down to Bishop Burn on Stranraer seafront, which had its characteristic variety of close waterfowl, including Greater Scaup, Wigeon, Red-breasted Merganser, Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Turnstone, Oystercatcher, Redshank, Curlew and a single Knot. A little offshore we could see a few Eider Ducks, Cormorant and Shag, while a bit further east by Balyett was a large flock of Mute Swans, with Curlews feeding on the fields behind.

Loch Ryan is Scotland's only significant shallow sea loch and a renowned birding spot throughout the year. At Innermessan, just south of Leffnoll Point, a welcoming Barn Owl flew low overhead as we left the vehicle. We then had cracking close views of lots of Slavonian Grebes, male and female Common Scoter, Red-throated Divers, Eider, Shag, Great Crested Grebes, Mergansers, Cormorants, Common and Black Guillemots. Some of these birds were firsts or lifetime best views for the group, and of some species which are often very difficult to see well on the seas around the UK. Of course, we were aided in this by a flat calm sea.

Having done so well so quickly, we then went up the western side of Loch Ryan to Wig Bay, where there were more Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes, Pale-bellied Brents and waders, including Ringed Plover, Turnstone and Oystercatcher. A pair of Stonechats provided some colour against the grey sea at Wig Point, as did a Kingfisher which flew low over the bay. On to lunch at Driftwood Café by Stranraer Marina, then a brief visit to nearby Broadstone, where we got fine views of our first Goldeneyes of the trip, plus more Mergansers, grebes and Red-Throated Divers.

Still in good light, we headed for a regular feeding area for Greenland White-fronted Geese, but despite a thorough search of favoured fields we saw none. A group of about 100 Lapwing sat eerily still close to the road, perfectly camouflaged against the dark, wet mud with myriad wet flashes. A single Golden Plover sat amongst them. Then an adult grey male Hen Harrier was himself harried by a crow and we all enjoyed cracking views as he banked and revealed the delicate, dark trailing edge to his underwing. A group of geese then flew over the road and dropped into a distant hollow in stubble. Despite driving around, we never did see them again, but were left wondering as to their identity. Then it was on to a regular Hen Harrier roost, only to be greeted by our first rain of the day and rapidly fading light! However, our luck was in and the rain soon passed, the light actually improved slightly, and just after sunset we enjoyed the to-ing and fro-ing of up to five Hen Harriers, including at least two brown ringtails and two adult grey males. These are special birds and often difficult to see at close quarters. We were therefore blessed by this spectacle as the harriers glided back and forth over their roost, interacting now and then, before dropping out of sight for the night into rank ground vegetation. We were just marvelling at our good fortune when

a huge flock of over 1,000 geese, mostly Pink-feet, flew noisily to roost, reminding us that we were still short of a key target goose species!

## Day 5

## Friday 17th November

Having bid adieu to our hosts at the Clachan, our only regret was that, in the gloom, we were unable all week to see the magnificent Rhinns of Kells range of hills above Dalry. Today was forecasted to be the best of the week and we could only hope that thick mist would lift as we dropped down the Ken valley to have another look at NTS Threave Wetlands in better weather, and in hope of seeing two species we'd not yet seen, Willow Tit and Greenland White-fronted Geese. As hoped, the light improved as we headed south past the autumn browns, yellows and golds of the woodlands and rough wood pastures of the Glenkens.

As we approached the swollen River Dee a Peregrine was spotted atop Archibald the Grim's magnificent ruined tower (14thC). An Otter was then seen briefly several times by some as it made its way upstream, and a Kingfisher flashed past downstream. Our good fortune was enhanced when we heard the characteristic 'electronic' buzzing contact call of Willow Tit, two of which obligingly perched up and moved through a succession of mossy boughs before us. The fastest declining bird in the UK, this was a major target species.

Then there was a brief cacophony of squealing pig sounds – the Water Rails again – though we never did see them. Two Treecreepers gave close views, and, a bit further along the floodbank, Reed Buntings and Bullfinches. To cap all this, there, through the trees on a field beyond Blackpark Marsh were some 75 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, as we have found this week. Now, we had them; wonderful!

Two of the party said their farewells, whilst the rest continued on up and over Meikle Wood Hill, which today afforded a fine panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. A group of Greylag Geese grazed in a distant field, whilst 500+ Pink-footed Geese alighted on a field just across the Dee. We then stopped to look at 15-20 Reed Buntings, which were feeding and perching in some rough grass with tree-guards all around us. Two more departed the company, whilst the remaining three continued on to Dumfries train station, driving past Carlingwark Loch with its Tufted Ducks and Goldeneye, and stopping at Dock Park (Dumfries) where there were now some 70 Waxwings. 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.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

I=Introduced		November 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17
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>			✓	✓	✓
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>				✓	
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>				✓	✓
Goosander (Common Merg.)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓		✓	H	✓
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>		H	H		H
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					✓

I=Introduced		November 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17
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>		✓	✓	✓	
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</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-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				✓	
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>				✓	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓	
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis aristotelis</i>				✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		2			
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1			
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	2	2		4	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>				1	
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1	1	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1			
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓			✓	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1			1
Saker Falcon - I (escape)	<i>Falco cherrug</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>	✓	✓	✓		H
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>		5			70
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	H	✓			
Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>					2
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	✓	H
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓	✓	✓
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



I=Introduced		November 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17
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>		1		1	1
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	H	1			
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓		✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		1			
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	✓	✓		✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1			
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>			✓		
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓		✓

## Mammals

I=Introduced		November 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓		
Common Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>			✓		
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>					1
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				✓	
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Grey Squirrel - I	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>			✓		✓
Wild Goat - i	<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>				✓	