

# The Winter Birds of Dumfries & Galloway

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th – 16th February 2024

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Whooper Swans - Marie Clarke



Barnacle & Pink-footed Geese - Virginia Wan



Goosanders - Marie Clarke



Yellowhammer, Tree Sparrow & Chaffinches - M Clarke

Tour report by Chris Rollie



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

## Summary

Dumfries & Galloway is home to the northernmost of southern species and the southernmost of northern species across 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. The weather on this tour was cool throughout: the first two days were dry and bright, followed by rain and fog, but with a bright end to the week in which the group enjoyed a wonderful few days' birding, delivering a total of 98 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 the 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 masses of waders, a foraging adult male Hen Harrier, and a menacing adult Peregrine perched atop a fencepost. In addition to very close views of Svalbard Barnacle Geese, RSPB Mersehead Reserve delivered Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Curlew, Lapwing, Tree Sparrow and Yellowhammer. Good views of elusive Greenland White-fronted Geese were enjoyed on RSPB's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve, together with the increasingly-rare Willow Tit. Up to 100 Red Kites came overhead at Bellymack Hill Red Kite feeding station, but seemed reluctant to put on their customary diving spectacle due to thick fog. However, our return later in the afternoon was rewarded by dome diving action.

Loch Ryan was a delight, as ever, with superb views of Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Greater Scaup, Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes, Common Scoter, Black Guillemot, Red-breasted Mergansers, Red-throated Diver, Common Eider and various waders all close inshore. Some 300 Pink-footed geese flew quite low overhead in huge Vs as we arrived at a Hen Harrier roost. They were immediately followed by a magnificent female Goshawk which came right over us, with her heavy body, deep wingbeats and full crop that told she would not be hungry for a while. However, thick fog rolled in and completely obscured our view of the roost, which has always provided a spectacular climax to our 'away days' on this tour hitherto. Thankfully, we'd already seen both foraging and roosting Hen Harriers earlier in the week, and so the group returned to dinner in good spirits. The last morning was spent in and around fine oak woodland, which provided an additional six new birds for the week.

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 12th February

All 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. Goosanders and Peregrine showed well in Dumfries, whilst a few Belted and Black Galloway Cattle were seen along the way. After checking in to the comfortable Clachan Inn, we were soon on our way south to Loch Stroan and the splendid granite viaduct that formerly carried the old 'Port Road' railway

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 two adult male Hen Harriers coming in to roost. Then it was back to the log fire of the Clachan and their superb cuisine and hospitality.

## Day 2

## Tuesday 13th February

On a fine day, we set off south towards the Solway and its renowned wintering waterfowl. Approaching the grey granite town of Dalbeattie, we slowed to view the Motte of Urr, Scotland's largest motte (Norman-era castle mound). 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. Holding good numbers of breeding waders and wildfowl in spring, it 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 several Tree Sparrows and Yellowhammers in bright breeding plumage. Pintail, Teal, Shoveler and other waterfowl were on the water in front of the Bruaich hide, while Lapwing and Curlew flew here and there overhead. The hide has two large murals of waterfowl 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.

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. We moved on to WWT Caerlaverock for lunch and the swan feed, 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. Whooper Swans from Iceland had a supporting cast of Mute Swans, Canada Geese, Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Moorhen, Tufted Ducks and a single Greater Scaup, while Yellowhammers also gratefully accepted scattered grain.

From nearby Saltcot Merse Observatory we enjoyed an elevated view of the merse and wet fields behind the sea wall. Huge groups of Svalbard Barnacle Geese, Golden Plover, Dunlin, Redshank, Roe Deer, a few Little Egrets and two Grey Plover were seen, plus an adult grey male Hen Harrier foraging low over the merse and gorse scrub. Meanwhile, the swiftly rising spring tide put up swirling groups of Red Knot. We also enjoyed a scope-filling view of an adult Peregrine, perched atop a fencepost. 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. A warm fire and another superb dinner at the Clachan were enjoyed by everyone.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 14th February

A dull, wet morning saw us heading south to National Trust for Scotland's Threave Wetlands Reserve near Castle Douglas, stopping briefly at Parton to view its listed Edwardian privy, and then to pick out a group of elusive

Greenland White-fronted Geese on RSPB's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve. A few Reed Buntings were seen along the path to the Dee, where the sound of squealing pigs indicated hidden Water Rails in the riparian marsh. From the hide overlooking Blackpark Marsh, we saw Wigeon, Mallard, Teal and Shoveler. Unfortunately, we didn't see or hear Willow Tit, and neither were there any Greenland Whitefronts on their favoured feeding fields. However, on retracing our walk back along the Dee, we saw a flock of some 200 Pink-footed Geese, and had fine views of Bullfinch and Treecreeper.

On to RSPB's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve, where the open water there 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, but we did enjoy splendid views of a small group of around 20 Greenland White-fronted Geese, with everyone clocking their bright orange bills, white faces and distinctive black belly patches. Then it was on to nearby Bellymack Hill Farm Red Kite Feeding Station, where we arrived in good time to enjoy our packed lunches and refreshments in the spacious visitor centre, before feeding time at 2.00pm.

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 2.00pm 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. However, whilst kites assembled in good numbers overhead as usual, today they seemed deterred from diving by thick fog, which also obscured what is normally a lovely view of the surrounding countryside. So, we nipped back down to RSPB's Ken-Dee and, on a short walk from the car park, sharp ears picked up the distinctive buzzing call of Willow Tit. Presently we were watching one of these elusive, rare birds moving through the hedge lining our track. Meanwhile, a call came in from Bellymack to say that the kites were coming in, and we returned in time to see several Red Kites spectacularly diving to snatch food from the ground and feeding platform.

## Day 4

## Thursday 15th February

In heavy rain and thick mist, 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. The high hills behind Clatteringshaws Loch were lost in mist, but we stopped briefly at Craigdews Hill to look at the interface and contrast between light grey granite and adjacent 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 we approached Stranraer, a hint of brightness developed and the rain stopped.

Loch Ryan is Scotland's only significant shallow sea loch and a renowned birding spot throughout the year. Bishop Burn on Stranraer seafront had groups of Greater Scaup, Wigeon, Red-breasted Merganser, Oystercatcher, Redshank, Curlew, Dunlin and two Black-tailed Godwits. A little offshore we saw a group of Pale-bellied Brent Geese flying north. At nearby Broadstone we had fairly close views of several Red-breasted Mergansers, Great Crested Grebe, Eider Duck, Common Scoter, Razorbill and Goldeneye. Then it was on to Wig Bay and The Wig

scar on the north Rhins shore of Loch Ryan. Several Slavonian Grebes gave great views in the bay, as did several other ducks already seen, but sadly no Long-tailed Ducks were present this time. However, we did catch up with the fine group of Pale-bellied Brent Geese at the Wig, while a big flock of Ringed Plover and Dunlin gathered at their high tide roost. Stonechats lined the track, whilst Redshanks and Oystercatchers kept up a constant cacophony.

After lunch at Driftwood Café by Stranraer Marina, it was on to Innermessan and Leffnoll Point, where we had more cracking close views of several of Slavonian Grebes, male and female Common Scoter, Red-throated Diver, Eider, Shag, Great Crested Grebes, Red-breasted Mergansers, Cormorants 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.

On fields behind the high tide at Balyett were hundreds of feeding Curlews, Lapwings and Oystercatchers, as we headed for a regular winter roost for Hen Harriers. On the way we passed a huge group of mixed Whooper and Mute Swans, but, more importantly, we also saw our first Magpies of the week! On arrival at the roost, several hundred noisy Pink-footed Geese flew low overhead in several characteristic V-shaped skeins. Then, a large female Goshawk flew very low overhead in the same direction, its bulk, heavy tail and deep flapping flight leaving no doubt as to its identity. Her crop was also bulging and she would certainly roost content tonight. A pair of Stonechats flicked about on rusty dock tops and fence-wires as we looked towards the roost, whilst a lone Roe Deer grazed in a green field beyond. However, just as our anticipation was building, thick fog rolled in from the sea and completely obscured our view of the roost. We waited on for some time in the hope that it might clear, recounting tales of various trips and other happenings, but to no avail. The fog remained, darkness began to fall and it was time to head back. Whilst patchy in places, the fog worsened on the higher Queen's Way, but not enough to completely obscure a Tawny Owl flying over the road in front of us. Log fires and a final splendid dinner awaited us in the Clachan.

## Day 5

## Friday 16th February

Our last morning dawned dry and bright, with early mist soon clearing. Following a look round the old kirkyard and Dalry Motte, we drove a mile or so to Garroch Estate and its fine oak woods, part of the Water of Ken Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). A gentle walk through the woods and a Victorian walled garden delivered several new species for the week, including Nuthatch, Goldcrest and Mistle Thrush. Further up the glen we came on a group of 8-10 Jays, another new bird, whilst a mystery bird eluded us at a farmyard feeder, just as we turned to collect our luggage and say our thanks and farewells at the Clachan. However, we weren't quite finished as we came on a large flock of Redwings on our return to Dumfries Station. So ended a marvellous week of birding in good company and comfortable accommodation, with excellent cuisine 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		February 2024				
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16
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	<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>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			H		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓		
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓			

I=Introduced		February 2024				
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16
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>		✓			
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓			
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓		✓	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	3				
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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>				✓	
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				✓	
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis aristotelis</i>				✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓		✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓		✓	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	2	1			
Eurasian Goshawk	<i>Accipiter Gentillis</i>				1	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				✓	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				H	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			1	1	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	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>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓		✓
Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			1		
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</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>		✓	✓	✓	✓

I=Introduced		February 2024				
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16
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>			✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓			
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>				✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	✓		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓		✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓			
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓			
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓		

## Mammals

		February 2024				
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
European Hare - I	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓			✓
European Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>		dead			
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓