

Winter Birds of Dumfries & Galloway

Naturetrek Tour Report

17th – 21st November 2025



Red Kites by Ian Draper



Whooper Swan by Ian Draper



Hair Ice Fungus (*Exidiopsis effuse*) by Ian Draper



Common Snipe by Viv Pritchard

Tour report by Chris Rollie



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Chris Rollic (Leader) with seven 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. In a cold, windy but dry and bright week the group enjoyed a wonderful few days' birding that delivered a total of 103 bird species.

RSPB Mershead Reserve provided wonderful close male Hen Harrier and good views of Svalbard Barnacle Geese, Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Curlew, Lapwing, Peregrine and Tree Sparrow. The Whooper Swan feed at WWT Caerlaverock was a close-up treat, followed by visits to hides with Merlin, Hen Harrier and stunning views of Black Redstart, a new bird for this tour. NTS Threave Wetlands Reserve had several hundred Pink-footed Geese and offered lovely views of winter thrushes, while RSPB's Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve delivered elusive Greenland White-fronted Geese. Around 200 Red Kites put on a breath-taking diving spectacle as they swooped for food at Belymack Hill Red Kite feeding station.

As ever, Loch Ryan was a delight, with good views of Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Wigeon, Greater Scaup, Common Scoter, Red-breasted Mergansers, Shags, Common Eider and various waders. Good, if more distant, views were had of Red-throated Divers, Black Guillemot, Goldeneye, Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes and around ten beautiful Long-tailed Duck. The day closed with a roosting flock over 20 Ravens, followed by two male and 1-2 female Hen Harriers flying to roost in the fading light.

We ended the week with a lovely walk in mature oak woodland, with good views of Nuthatch, territorial Ravens and fine Hair Ice and King Alfred's Cakes fungi. Historical attractions in the passing included 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 17th November

Two of the party were met in early afternoon at Dumfries railway station and we were soon heading west into Galloway and our accommodation in St John's Town of Dalry, a small village nestling among the hills in the Glenkens of Kirkcudbrightshire. A few Belted and Black Galloway Cattle were seen along the way, as were several Common Buzzards and Red Kites, the former perch-hunting due to lack of wind. After completing our party and checking into the comfortable Clachan Inn, we headed a few miles south to Loch Ken and a nearby Hen Harrier roost. Sadly, no harriers were seen but the spectacular view and tranquil ambience were much appreciated, as was a lone diving Dabchick. Several Woodcock got up from the roadside as we headed back to the log fire of the Clachan and their superb cuisine and hospitality.

Day 2

Tuesday 18th November

We set off south on a cool, bright morning towards the Solway and its renowned wintering waterfowl. Approaching the grey granite town of Dalbeattie we stopped to view the Motte of Urr, Scotland's largest motte. We then stopped briefly for a fine Mistle Thrush which perched up obligingly by the roadside. 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 offered close views of several Tree Sparrows, while the wetland a little beyond held several Shoveler, Pintail, Teal and Mallard. Roe Deer relaxed on wet pasture, which also held a few Svalbard Barnacle Geese. A female Peregrine flew overhead, while Lapwing, Teal, Pintail, Wigeon, Shoveler and other waterfowl were on the water in front of the Bruaich hide, but the highlight was surely a magnificent adult male Hen Harrier, which hunted his way towards and presently right in front of us! This hide has two large murals of waterfowl by well-known wildlife artist, John Threlfall, who once lived and painted on the reserve. Several thousand Barnacle Geese got up behind the wetland as we were about to leave the reserve, perhaps disturbed by a Marsh Harrier that appeared in the same area.

We then took the coast road up the Nith Estuary, past the ruined Sweetheart Abbey, through Dumfries and on to WWT Caerlaverock, where an obliging flock of Pink-footed Geese grazed in a nearby field. We had lunch at the swan feed, where grain is put out in front of a large, heated centre, much to the delight of an impressive assemblage of wildfowl including Icelandic Whooper Swans, Mute Swans, Canada Geese, Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Moorhen, Tufted Ducks and a pair of Gadwall.

The Saltcot Merse Observatory overlooks the merse and wet fields behind the sea wall, where there were several groups of Svalbard Barnacle Geese, including a leucistic individual, Little and Great White Egrets, whilst a preening female Merlin perched briefly atop a willow, and a more distant Peregrine on driftwood. An adult grey male Hen Harrier foraged past several times but our rarest find was a female Black Redstart which was initially spotted on the gutter of our hide and then dropped down to catch insects from fenceposts. From there we went to the Folly Pond Hide, with its evocative pre-dusk fanfare of roosting Whooper Swans and close views of Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Lapwing and Snipe. We ended the day with a roosting flight of several thousand Barnacle Geese, then it was back to the Clachan for dinner.

Day 3

Wednesday 19th November

A glorious morning saw us heading south to the National Trust for Scotland's Threave Wetlands Reserve near Castle Douglas, stopping briefly at Carlingwark Loch where we saw good numbers of Goldeneye, Dabchick and several Coot (very local thereabouts). The resident pair of Peregrines sat atop Threave Castle, while along the River Dee we saw Heron and a female Goosander. An unseen Water Rail squealed nearby, but there were no Greenland White-fronted Geese on their favoured feeding fields beyond Blackpark Marsh, and neither did we see the elusive Willow Tit, the fastest declining bird in the UK according to the RSPB. However, we did have fine views of Fieldfare and Redwing, and Little and Great Egrets flew past.

On to Loch Ken/River Dee, where open water and marshes there and at Threave are designated Special Protection Areas under the European Birds Directive due to their important populations of wintering Greenland White-fronted and Icelandic Greylag Geese. We saw 200 Greylags and some Wigeon near Balmaghie Kirk and then a few distant Greenland Whitefronts on a field at Mains of Duchrae. We then arrived at nearby Bellymack Hill Farm Red Kite Feeding Station in good time to enjoy our packed lunches and refreshments on the balcony of the spacious visitor centre, before kite feeding time at 2pm.

The feeding station commenced 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. We weren't disappointed today with around 150 kites entertaining us.

Then it was back to Ken-Dee Marshes, where we enjoyed better views of around 50 Greenland Whitefronts, with their bright orange bills, white faces and distinctive black belly patches. Two of the party opted to stay in the warmth of the vehicle and were rewarded with an approach of first two then three Brown Hares.

Day 4

Thursday 20th November

On yet another dry morning 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. Snow lay on the high hills to the north beyond Clatteringshaws Loch, then we paused at Craigdews Hill to view 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.

Loch Ryan is Scotland's only significant shallow sea loch and a renowned birding spot throughout the year. We arrived at Stranraer seafront at high tide and were soon onto Greater Scaup, Cormorant, Wigeon, Red-breasted Mergansers and a single female Long-tailed Duck. Along the near high tideline were Turnstones, Redshanks and Oystercatchers, while several Curlews probed on roadside fields.

We then moved round to Innermessan and Leffnoll Point, where we had good offshore views of Slavonian Grebes, Common Scoter, Red-throated Divers, Eider Ducks, Great Crested Grebes and Cormorants, some of which are often very difficult to see well on the seas around the UK. Shags and Red-breasted Mergansers were much nearer, as was a group of roosting waders at Leffnoll Point where we had astonishingly close views of Golden Plover, Ringed Plover and Turnstones; they didn't mind us at all.

We had our packed lunches by the seafront at Broadstones on the edge of Stranraer, watching Common Scoter, Black Guillemot, Razorbill and two magnificent male Long-tailed Ducks, with Ailsa Craig, the Paps of Jura and hills of Arran as an attractive backcloth beyond the mouth of Loch Ryan.

At least six more Long-tailed Ducks were seen from Sole Burn foot, where we also picked up a nice group of Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Wigeon, Goldeneye, a Greenshank and Common, Black-headed and Herring Gulls. Then it was on to Wig Bay and its scar on the north Rhins shore of Loch Ryan, where we saw more Pale-bellied Brents, groups of Redshank and Ringed Plovers on the shore, Rock Pipit, Stonechat and a characteristically tight flock of bouncing, jaunty Twite, flitting between thistle beds above the tideline.

Finally, we headed for a regular winter roost for Hen Harriers, where we were soon onto a noisy gathering of over 20 Ravens, mostly in pairs, honking and cronking their own way to roost in a small conifer wood. Soon after the sun sunk below the horizon a beautiful grey adult male Hen Harrier came low over the roost into the cool northerly breeze. After a few sweeps he soon picked his spot and dropped into the long vegetation that would give him shelter and protection for the night. As the light faded, another grey male and at least one or two brown ringtail hen harriers were glimpsed by some of our group, but this brilliant day was done and it was time to return to log fires and a final splendid dinner at the Clachan.

Day 5

Friday 21st November

Our last morning again dawned dry and sunny, though the overnight temperature dropped to -6C and there was a dusting of snow on the Rhins of Kells range to the northwest. A group of some 15 Whooper Swans had been on maize stubbles below the village all week, and sure enough they were there again as we walked around the old kirkyard and Dalry Motte, picking up birds and looking over various historical features. From there 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 provided a nice contrast of habitats, good views of Heron, Nuthatch and prukking Ravens, with rasping Jays heard in the background. We emerged from the wood beside an icebound loch and wonderful views to the nearby hoary Rhins of Kells and Carsphairn Hills. Then it was back to the Clachan to collect luggage, say our goodbyes and on to Dumfries. Several Red Kites, Common Buzzards, Jays and Bullfinches were seen along the way and 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 the group for making this such an enjoyable and memorable week.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

I=Introduced		November 2025				
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21
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>		✓	✓		
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</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>				✓	
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			✓	✓	
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓		✓		
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				✓	
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</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>		✓			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓		
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓		✓		
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>				✓	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	✓				
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				✓	

I=Introduced		November 2025				
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common 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>Gulosus aristotelis</i>				✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓	✓		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓			
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		2		3	
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1			
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	H				✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓		
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		✓			
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓	✓		
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			H	✓	✓
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>		✓			✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓		
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓			✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓			
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	H				
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		1			
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	

I=Introduced		November 2025				
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓			
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓		✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</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>		H	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓		
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>				✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓			
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓			
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓			

Mammals

		November 20205				
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21
European Hare - I	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>			3		
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		3			
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓		



Black Redstart by Ian Draper