

The Winter Birds of Dumfries & Galloway

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 15th February 2026



Barnacle Goose



Long-tailed Duck



Red Kite



Otter

Tour report by Chris Rollie
Photos by Sue Keal



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 Rollie (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Summary

Geographically central in the UK, Dumfries and 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. In a cold but largely dry week, the group enjoyed a wonderful few days' birding which delivered a total of ninety-nine bird species, plus Otter.

Two of the group saw the Otter in Dumfries on the River Nith, while later arrivals enjoyed superb views of male and female Goosanders fishing there. This first day ended with two adult grey male Hen Harriers flying to roost in the fading light. The recent temporary closure of WWT Caerlaverock altered the planned itinerary, but more time at RSPB Mersehead Reserve gave wonderfully close views of thousands of Svalbard Barnacle Geese, plus Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler, Redshank, Curlew, Lapwing, Tree Sparrow, Marsh Harrier and a splendid Red-tailed Hawk, of captive origin. NTS Threave Wetlands Reserve provided fleeting glimpses of Barn Owl and much better views of eight-seven Greenland White-fronted Geese. Around 150 Red Kites put on a breath-taking diving spectacle as they swooped for food at Bellymack Hill Red Kite feeding station.

As ever, Loch Ryan was a delight, with superb close views of Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Wigeon, Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes, Common Scoter, Red-breasted Mergansers, Eider, Greater Scaup, six beautiful Long-tailed Ducks and various waders. Good, if more distant, views were had of Red-throated Divers, Goldeneye, Shag and a single Black-throated Diver. The day closed with several large flocks of Pink-footed Geese, followed by fleeting views of a ringtail Hen Harrier flying to roost.

A rare overnight fall of snow on the last night confined us to a leisurely walk next morning, when we took in some local attractions and bird feeders, where we bagged Goldfinch, our 99th bird species for the week! Historical attractions included the Motte of Urr, 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 at 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

Wednesday 11th February

One of the group was met off the bus from Carlisle at Whitesands in Dumfries, just in time to see an Otter swimming in the River Nith and obligingly climbing on to the base of a near arch of Dervorguilla's Bridge, the oldest multiple-arched bridge in Scotland. Three more of the party were met soon after at Dumfries railway station, but unfortunately the Otter had gone upon our return, though one of them had seen it the day before. However, a male and three female Goosanders provided a close spectacle as they fished below the nearby caul (weir). We then headed west into Galloway and our accommodation in St John's Town of Dalry, a small village nestled among the hills in the Glenkens of Kirkcudbrightshire. A few Belted and Black Galloway Cattle were seen along the way, as were several Buzzards and Red Kites. After completing our party and checking into the comfortable Clachan Inn, we headed a few miles south to Loch Ken and on to a nearby Hen Harrier roost, where we saw two distant

but unmistakable adult males flying to roost shortly after sunset. Then it was back to the log fire of the Clachan, and their superb cuisine and hospitality.

Day 2

Thursday 12th February

We set off south on a dry, cold and moderately windy morning, towards the Solway and its renowned wintering waterfowl, stopping briefly opposite RSPB Ken-Dee Marshes Reserve, where two of us saw five or six elusive Greenland White-fronted Geese take off and fly south over the loch, plus a lone Great Black-backed Gull, our only one of the tour. We then stopped to identify other gulls in a large mixed flock: they included many Common, Black-headed and Herring Gulls, with a few Lesser Black-backs. A Treecreeper and a flock of Fieldfares to our rear provided a supporting cast, as did several Red Kites and Buzzards. 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 holds good numbers of breeding waders and wildfowl in spring, and is home to thousands of Svalbard Barnacle Geese and other northern wildfowl in winter, while a traditional arable rotation ensures good numbers of farmland passerines year-round.

A fine group of about sixty Curlews were feeding on a roadside field as we entered the reserve, and then we saw the first of many groups of Svalbard Barnacle Geese, some of them very close and offering super opportunities for photographers. The visitor centre feeders gave close views of several Tree and House Sparrows, Coal, Great and Blue Tits, Chaffinches, Greenfinch, Robin and Dunnock. Roe Deer relaxed on wet pasture, which also held more Curlews, Lapwings, Redshanks and Little Egret, while Mallards, Teals, Pintails, Wigeons, Shovelers, Shelducks and Gadwalls were on the water in front of the Bruaich hide. This hide has two large murals of waterfowl by the well-known wildlife artist, John Threlfall, who once lived and painted on the reserve. In all we saw several thousand Barnacle Geese, flying over noisily or feeding and resting in fields nearby. A snatch of Skylark calls heralded a group of them feeding near the hide.

We ate lunch in the visitor centre before walking out to the larger Meida (Meadow) Hide, overlooking some deeper water and extensive reedbed. There we picked up Moorhen, Little Grebe and a magnificent immature male Marsh Harrier, which flew past several times. There was also a Common Buzzard, but the highlight was perhaps an unexpected (North American) Red-tailed Hawk, which flew to land in an Ash tree on the northern edge of the reserve, but was seen well in flight and through our telescopes. No jesses or rings were evident, but it is certain that this was an escaped falconry bird. A Mistle Thrush showed well atop a near bush, while a Kestrel hovered towards the dune slacks as we walked back to the Visitor Centre.

We ended the day at Carlingwark Loch on the edge of Castle Douglas town, where we saw a variety of wildfowl, including a tight group of twelve Little Grebes, numerous Goldeneyes, Coots, Mallards, Wigeons, Teals, Mute Swans and Goosanders, and a single Great Crested Grebe. Then, just as rain arrived, it was time to head back to the Clachan for another superb dinner.

Day 3

Friday 13th February

A dry, bright morning saw us heading south to the National Trust for Scotland's Threave Wetlands Reserve near Castle Douglas, where we spotted a Barn Owl playing peek-a-boo through the entrance hole to its nest box in a

big riparian Ash tree. The resident Threave Castle Peregrines weren't at home, but distant high-pitched calls alerted us to the approach of a flock of around five hundred Pink-footed Geese, which made an impressive flypast. A female Goosander swam on the River Dee, while the adjacent marsh held Teal, Mallard, Wigeon, Cormorant, Grey Heron and a fine male Goosander. Threave is favourite haunt of Greenland White-fronted Geese, but they hadn't been seen there or indeed anywhere locally for many weeks. So, it was a magical moment when eight-seven of them were spotted feeding and resting on fields in bright sunlight, at adjacent Blackpark Marsh. This subspecies of Greater White-fronted Goose is globally threatened and in rapid decline, so it was heart-warming to scope them and enjoy their distinguishing features of chocolate-brown plumage, black belly bars, orange legs and a neat white blaze surrounding the bills. Sadly, we weren't so lucky this time with the elusive Willow Tit, but several Goldcrests foraged in woodland towards the upper hide, while eight or so Roe Deer lounged in the strong sunlight in a neighbouring field.

Then it was on lunch at nearby Bellymack Hill Farm Red Kite Feeding Station, where we arrived in good time to enjoy our packed lunches in the spacious visitor centre, before feeding time at 2.00pm. The feeding station was established in 2003 as part of the award-winning Galloway Kite Trail, established by the RSPB in partnership with the Forestry Commission and local businesses, with funding support from Scottish Natural Heritage and others. 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 every afternoon throughout the year (except Mondays). The ensuing spectacle was simply spellbinding: about a hundred and fifty Red Kites came swooshing down deftly to grasp these morsels and sweep back up in a succession of mesmerising dives.

From there, we dropped down to a scrubby farm track which often has Willow Tit, but not today. However, we did encounter a nice group of Bullfinches, and then a party of Fieldfares with at least one Redwing in tow. We ended the day with a short walk to a cosy hide overlooking feeders and a water feature. Chaffinches, Treecreeper, Coal Tits and a Great Spotted Woodpecker all showed very well, with a close, if fleeting, visit by a Jay. Nuthatch, Ravens and dozens of Red Kites were noisy throughout, the latter gathering overhead as roosting time approached. A Green Woodpecker yaffled nearby, but never showed. However, the show was over when a male Sparrowhawk flashed through the scene and perched unseen nearby.

Day 4

Saturday 14th February

St Valentine's Day dawned gloriously with a cloudless blue sky and hoar frost (-6°C) overnight. We soon 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. A photo stop took in the high snow-capped Rhinns of Kells and the Merrick range of hills to the north, beyond mirror-like Clatteringshaws Loch; then we took another pause at Craigdews Hill to view the interface and contrast between light grey granite and adjacent darker metamorphosed greywacke, a striking geological feature. Wild goats have roamed Galloway's hills since Neolithic times, and several were seen in Craigdews goat park. Sun-sparkling, melting ice droplets hung like diamonds from scrubby Willows as we left.

Loch Ryan is Scotland's only significant shallow sea loch, and is a renowned birding spot throughout the year. We arrived at Stranraer seafront at high tide, and were soon onto rafts of Wigeons and Red-breasted Mergansers, with a few Goldeneyes, Greater Scaups, Common Scoters, Slavonian and Great Crested Grebes, Eider sand male and female Long-tailed Ducks. Along the tide line were Bar-tailed Godwits, Oystercatchers, Redshanks, Turnstones,

Dunlins and Ringed Plovers, while the wet fields behind held good numbers of Curlews and more Oystercatchers. We paused briefly at Balyett on the south-east corner of the loch, where a large raft of Greater Scaups and a few Tufted Ducks provided incredibly close views, right by the high tide line.

We then continued round to Innermessan and Leffnoll Point, where we had cracking views of Slavonian Grebes, male and female Common Scoters, Red-throated Divers, Eiders, Shags, Great Crested Grebes, Red-breasted Mergansers, Cormorants, and a single Black-throated Diver. The flat calm and strong sun combined to provide stunning views of species which are often very difficult to see well on the seas around the UK. To cap it all, we sat rather surreally in the sun on the upper shingle of Leffnoll Point and ate our packed lunches, while watching diving Shags, Eiders and passing Shelducks. Greylag Geese chatted raucously nearby.

Next, we went to the North Rhins and the western shore of the loch, where we stopped briefly at Sole Burn to view assorted waders, including Greenshank, with a northern backdrop of Ailsa Craig and the snowy peaks of Arran and the Paps of Jura. We then stood on an old pier and watched several magnificent Long-tailed Ducks close inshore, with more Common Scoters, Slavonian Grebes, mergansers, Goldeneyes and Eiders. At Wig Bay, we walked along the shore track to The Scar, and had great views of a tight flock of around a hundred cackling Pale-bellied Brent Geese, alternately feeding on an adjacent field and swimming on the bay opposite, becoming our sixth goose species of the week. A pair of Stonechats foraged among vegetation above the high tide line, whilst a small flock of Golden Plover hithered and thithered high over Wig Bay, as if unsure just where they wanted to go. A Little Egret flew lazily past.

Finally, we headed for a regular winter roost site for Hen Harriers, stopping for a bit to scope around a thousand Pink-footed Geese in a distant field, while two loners gave cracking views just by the roadside, as did a Hooded Crow, no doubt a blow-over from Erin's Isle just over twenty miles away. Noisy, purposeful Ravens encouraged us to head on to the roost, but not before taking in a big group of Greylag Geese. By this time, the sky had clouded over and a freshening southerly wind delivered perfect roosting conditions, and, just approaching sunset, a brown ringtail Hen Harrier appeared for a minute or so before setting in to roost. What a day! Log fires and a final splendid dinner awaited us in the Clachan.

Day 5

Sunday 15th February

Snow is now something of a rarity in Galloway, but we awoke to a fresh covering of about an inch, below a leaden sky. Road conditions curtailed our plans to visit Water of Ken Oak Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and instead we walked around the old kirkyard, Dalry Motte, the village park and various bird feeders, which at last delivered Goldfinch, our ninety-ninth bird species for the week. We also heard Nuthatch, and saw Greenfinch, Great, Blue and Long-tailed Tits, and a few Magpies, only one of which had been seen hitherto! Then it was back to the Clachan to collect our luggage, say farewell to one of the party, and to drive on to Dumfries.

By this time heavy rain had arrived and it was a wet drive to the station, from where three of the group departed. There was just time then for the leader and the remaining client to go a short distance down the River Nith to look across to RSPB's Kirkconnell Merse Reserve, where there were several hundred Barnacle Geese, while on the river itself there were Teals, Mallards and Redshanks. Buzzards were seen on the way back to the station, and so ended a marvellous week of birding in good company and comfortable accommodation, with excellent cuisine at the

Clachan Inn. Thanks must go to the staff for their hospitality and delicious food, and to the group for making this such an enjoyable and stimulating week.

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	February 2026				
			11	12	13	14	15
	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>		✓	✓	✓	
	Greenland White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>		5	87		
	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</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>				6	
	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓	✓	✓		
	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				✓	
	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
	Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	
	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	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>		✓		✓	✓
	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				✓	
	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	
	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓			
	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		✓	✓
	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>				✓	
	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		✓	✓
	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				✓	
	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓	
	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓	
	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

I=Introduced	Common name	Scientific name	February 2026				
			11	12	13	14	15
	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		1			
	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓			
	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓	
	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>				✓	
	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	
	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>				✓	
	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓	
	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓	
	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓		
	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	2			1	
	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1			
	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>		✓			
	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			✓		
	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓		✓
	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			H		
	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓		✓	
	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓		
	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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>				✓	
	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	H		✓	✓	
	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓		✓
	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>		✓	✓	H	✓
	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓		H
	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓	✓		✓
	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓		
	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓			✓
	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓		
	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓		
	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓
	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>				✓	
	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓			
	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓				

I=Introduced		February 2026				
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓		✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓		
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓	
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓		✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓		

Mammals

I=Introduced, S=signs		February 2026				
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15
European Mole	<i>Talpa europea</i>	S	S	S	S	S
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓		✓	
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	✓				
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	