

North Devon – Wildflowers, Butterflies & Seabirds

Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 25th June 2021



Report by Martin Batt & Nicola Corrigan
Images courtesy of Charles Kinsey, Jan Manning, Nicola
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Tour Participants: Martin Batt & Nicola Corrigan (leaders) with 12 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

North Devon has been relatively little known in UK wildlife circles, but has boasted a National Park on Exmoor since 1954, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty on its coast since 1959, and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve since 1976. The latter was expanded in 2002, and now includes Lundy and the entire coast, estuaries and catchment of the Taw and Torridge rivers, south to the edge of Dartmoor. A large part of the coastal zone was explored in this first Naturetrek tour of North Devon in 2021.

The variety of habitats and landscape is stunning in a relatively small area. From high cliffs and slopes; wooded coombes and valleys; rocky and sandy bays (with the entire coastline and Lundy designated as Marine Protected Areas); five dune systems, including the enormous Braunton Burrows; coastal and upland heaths; estuaries; and coastal and floodplain grazing marsh. For botanists, several national rarities can be found here, and for lovers of cetaceans, seals, bats, seabirds and butterflies, an extended visit to the area can be very rewarding, as our clients found on this first tour. The expert team included locally-based specialists on most days, adding their long experience to the local knowledge of our leaders.

This tour based itself at the magnificent 4-star Woolacombe Bay Hotel, set adjacent to the extensive sand dunes that form a backdrop to Woolacombe Bay, overlooking a splendid garden and lawns with views of Lundy. The adjacent two-mile-long sandy beach had been voted by Sunday Times readers just the previous weekend as the finest in England in 2021.

Day 1

Monday 21st June

Woolacombe Dunes

The Edwardian hotel has benefitted from major recent investment, having been extensively modernised, and it now features both modern and period features, a tennis court, billiards room and both indoor and outdoor pools. Bracing sea bathing and surfing are both readily accessible within 300 metres. In its long history Woolacombe Bay Hotel has played its part, as the US Army Headquarters for the D-Day Assault Training Center covering almost all the coastline between Westward Ho! and Woolacombe in 1943-44.

Our “invasion” of North Devon was on a very different scale, as our 12 clients gathered at the hotel, with some being met at Tiverton Parkway station by our leaders Nicola and Martin. After a short briefing meeting in the ballroom, which became our regular venue for checklist updates each evening, we took dinner in the Brasserie restaurant. Feedback from our clients gave the hotel and its staff high marks for service and food quality, and their polite reminders and obvious seriousness about COVID-19 precautions built our confidence.

After dinner, we assembled in front of the hotel to meet Jonathan Fairhurst, Lead Ranger for Croyde, Woolacombe & Ilfracombe at the National Trust. Jonathan has been managing an innovative and highly successful habitat restoration project on the dunes of Woolacombe Warren and was keen to show us the results. As Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) called and circled above, he led us across the lush lawns and garden of the hotel, with the attendant Pied (White) Wagtails (*Motacilla alba yarelli*) and past the ramp to the famous beach, on to the footpath into the dunes. Pyramidal Orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) were quickly apparent amongst the Marram Grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) and Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*).



We paused to take in the magnificent view of Lundy, some 22 miles distant on the horizon, on this calm evening with gradually clearing skies, while Jonathan explained the management principles behind the dune restoration. The National Trust started trialling a new winter grazing regime using hardy Devon Red cattle, controlled by an innovative electronic tag system and a circular buried cable around the area being grazed. This gives the cattle a tiny electrical pulse when they approach the cable, without the need for an intrusive electric fence, in a landscape that is very heavily visited even in winter.



The result is increasing numbers of orchids, including the locally scarce Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*). These were found at the far point of our walk, about a mile down the beach, and on the grazed foredune slopes. On the way, we saw a number of pairs of the highly territorial Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola*) taking up their traditional perches high in the scrub. Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) swept across the paths at low level enjoying the calm evening's rise of insects.

Small clumps of Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Biting Stonecrop (*Sedum acre*), Restharrow (*Ononis repens*), Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*), Yellow Rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), Early Forget-me-not (*Mysotis ramosissima*), Milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*), Storksbill (*Erodium cicutarium*) and Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) created a mosaic of colourful flowers in the dune turf. Tiny white Eyebright (*Euphrasia* spp.) punctuated the scene, whilst the taller Evening Primrose (*Oenothera glazioviana*), an invader from western Atlantic shores provided vivid yellow highlights. Occasional Common Broomrape (*Orobanche minor*), Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) and Stinking Iris (*Iris foetidissima*) fringed the path edges. Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*), the food plant of many butterflies, and the more prostrate Dewberry (*Rubus caesius*) were present in quantity, and subject to the attentions of winter cattle, while hundreds of vivid pink Foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*) towered above the smaller plants. Above us on the slopes, extensive stands of Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) marked the skyline of the 200-metre bulk of Woolacombe Down.

The Midsummer sun slowly sank towards the horizon, and as dusk fell, we saw and heard a group of about 30 high-flying Common Swifts (*Apus apus*) wheeling and feeding above us, near the northern entrance to the dunes,

the light catching their pale throats. These wonderful birds have experienced dramatic declines in North Devon as elsewhere in the British Isles this summer, and it was heartening to see such a large group at the end of a special first evening. We thanked Jonathan for his expert guidance and headed off to bed. The sun appeared below a cloud bank as a red semicircle on the horizon - for those who stayed out to see it set - at 9.36pm, on the longest day of the year.

Day 2

Tuesday 22nd June

Woolacombe to Lee; Braunton & Braunton Burrows; Braunton Beacon

A beautiful summer morning greeted us as we headed for breakfast together in the hotel's Doyle's Restaurant at 8am. The group was ready to depart for the first full day's activities by 9am, and we set off in our two minibuses to Lee Bay, about five miles distant on the Bristol Channel coast. After driving down the spectacular steep-sided winding road, through dense woodland to the village of Lee, we parked at the top of the sheltered, north facing cove. Paula Ferris and Jan Manning, our two expert guides from Coastwise North Devon were waiting to greet us.



After donning our wellies, or trainers, we headed down the concrete-paved path across the rocks to assemble for a briefing on the morning's activity. As Fulmars (*Fulmaris glacialis*) and Ravens (*Corvus corax*) wheeled overhead, we gathered round a table, and

Paula & Jan showed some specimens that they had already been out to collect. Examples of red seaweeds such as Dulse (*Palmaria palmata*), Coral Weed (*Corralina officinalis*), and Irish Moss (*Chondrus crispus*), green seaweed Sea Lettuce (*Ulva latuca*), and brown Serrated Wrack (*Fucus serratus*), and Kelp (*Laminaria digitata*) were enlivened by specimens of Five-bearded Rockling (*Ciliata mustela*), Common Prawn (*Palaemon elegans*) and the shells of Spider Crab (*Maja brachydactyla*) and Edible Crab (*Cancer pagurus*). Paula and Jan handed out useful Rockpool Guides to help us identify the many intertidal plants and animals we might find on our visit.

We headed down the beach in two groups, on a spring tide which, whilst low, was not the lowest possible. This edge of the Bristol Channel has a tidal range of up to 9.5 metres in September and March, when some very rare corals and other animals may be exposed. As a result, we didn't find the elusive Devonshire Cup Coral (*Caryophyllia smithii*) but we were able to locate more Rockling specimens, as well as Worm Pipefish (*Nerophis lumbriciformis*) and Common Blenny (*Lipophrys folis*). Numerous Limpets (*Patella vulgata*), Barnacles (*Chthamalus stellatus*) and Topshells (*Calliostoma zizyphinum*) populated the rock crevices created by the deeply folded strata of slate. The crustaceans we found included the aggressive red-eyed Velvet Swimming Crab (*Necora puber*), a Risso's Crab (*Xantho pilipes*) and a mating pair of Montagu's Crab (*Xanta hydrophilus*). As Lee Bay is relatively sheltered, anemones are not as common here as on the nearby west-facing surf beaches, but we did manage to find occasional Beadlet (*Actinia equina*) and Snakelocks Anemones (*Anemonia viridis*).

We gathered back at our “base camp” and reviewed our finds and sightings. The most exciting was a tiny orange marked Nudibranch (*Polycera quadrilineata*) and an almost microscopic larval shrimp, later identified by Andy Mackie of Wales Museum as a *Mysid* species.



Nudibranch *Polycera quadrilineata* Image: Jan Manning

It was soon time to head for our pre-booked pub lunch at The Grampus in Lee, a pleasant walk up the valley, past cottage gardens and wildflower meadows. After a very enjoyable hour in the sun-drenched garden, we headed back to the minibuses for a short journey south to Braunton Countryside Centre, situated in the centre of the large village, to be met by our guides for the afternoon, Mary and John Breeds MBE.

The Countryside Centre is the creation of North Devon Environmental Trust some 34 years ago and remains the best place to gain an insight into the natural history of Braunton Burrows and the local area. Braunton grew as a medieval fishing and farming community based on the River Caen and the Great Field, a fertile area of alluvial land lying slightly above the floodplain of the Taw-Torridge Estuary. It is one of only two remaining medieval field systems in England. Protecting the entire area from the Atlantic is a vast dune system, some four miles by one, and 900 hectares in area. Mary Breeds explained the significance of the site, an SSSI, part of North Devon Coast AONB, and the core of the UNESCO North Devon Biosphere Reserve. Colourful and informative displays highlighted the plants and animals most typical of this very special site. After our brief visit, we headed off west past the Great Field, and towards the car park at Sandy Lane in the centre of The Burrows.

John Breeds was ready to greet us, with the products of a moth trap from his garden and fields near Knowle, just north of Braunton, the previous evening, as well as wonderful specimens of Grass Snake (*Natrix helvetica*) and Slow Worm (*Anguis fragilis*) which some of the group enjoyed handling – others were not so keen! Among the moths, highlights were magnificent Large Elephant (*Deilephila elpenor*), Small Elephant (*Deilephila porcellus*) and Privet (*Sphinx ligustri*) Hawkmoths. John encouraged the group to handle these impressively large insects, the latter being the UK’s largest moth with a span of 9-12cm. Other moths seen were Brimstone (*Opisthoptis luteolata*), Orchard Ermine (*Yponomeuta padella*), Peppered (*Biston betularia*), Mullein (*Cucullia verbasci*), and Buff Tip (*Phalera bucephala*).

By 3pm, we were walking along Dog Lane into the central section of the Burrows, led by Mary Breeds. Mary is author of the definitive Wildflowers of Braunton Burrows handbook, and an expert on the botany of this incredible site, which has over 600 species of flowering plants. We turned slightly north-west, into Cotton Slack, a damp area of the dunes that floods in winter to a depth of 50cm or so. This dries out somewhat in spring and provides ideal habitat for orchids. We immediately found stands of Pyramidal (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*), on the drier dune slopes, Early Marsh (*Dactylorhiza incarnata*) and Southern Marsh (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*) orchids. The much less colourful Common Twayblade (*Neottia ovata*) and the later-flowering Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) were two other members of the *Orchidaceae* that we found in the same slack. We also discovered a few specimens of the small Adder’s-tongue Fern (*Ophioglossum vulgatum*) along with the Variegated Horsetail (*Equisetum variegatum*) among the Creeping Willow (*Salix repens*) with its attendant red Poplar Leaf Beetles (*Chrysomela populi*),

Surrounding us on the drier dune slopes, a wildflower garden of other plants included the ubiquitous Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Yellow Rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), the yellow-flowered Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*), and Lady's Bedstraw (*Galium verum*). Restharrow (*Ononis repens*) provided a carpet of pink flowers at low level. Near its north-eastern limit here, Yellow Bartsia (*Parentucellia viscosa*) is locally common on the Burrows.



Some of the tall bold spikes of Common Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) revealed their own Mullein Moth caterpillars, and as at Woolacombe, Evening Primrose (*Oenothera glazioviana*) provided stands of brilliant yellow flowers, contrasting with the prolific, and magnificent, erect blue Viper's Bugloss (*Echium vulgare*) which is very attractive to insects.

Occasional tiny specimens of the pink Common Centaury (*Centaureum erythrea*) punctuated the purple lawns of Wild Thyme (*Thymus polytrichus*). This typical plant of Braunton Burrows used to be much more extensive prior to the effects of myxomatosis on the huge rabbit population, which had kept competing grass and other competitors under control.

As we approached the sea, John and Mary showed us some re-created dune pools, excavated in the hope of creating suitable conditions on the open damp sand for the return of the Fen Orchid (*Liparis loeselii*). Some of the highlights were Hairy Rock Cress (*Arabis hirsuta*), Dune Fescue (*Vulpia fasciculata*), Sand Catstail (*Pbleum arenaria*) on the dune slopes, with



Image: Nicola Corrigan

Fen Pondweed (*Potamogeton coloratus*) and Water Speedwell (*Veronica catenata*) in the water.

This series of ponds was created some 25 years ago under John's supervision, when he was Warden of the then National Nature Reserve. Partridge Slack is now home to the largely nocturnal Great Crested Newt (*Triturus cristatus*) introduced from Ainsdale on the Sefton (Lancashire) coast at about the same time by John. They are now present in nearly every pond on the Burrows. Grass Snakes (*Natrix helvetica*) also find this low, damp habitat to their liking. Adders (*Vipera berus*) and Sand Lizards (*Lacerta agilis*) prefer basking on the exposed sand on south facing slopes of the dunes, but even on this sunny afternoon visit we were unlikely to see them, unfortunately, as they would have reached their active temperature much earlier in the day. A female Emperor Dragonfly (*Anax imperator*) was ovipositing in the pond. A very different set of plants prefers this damp habitat, including Bog Pimpernel (*Lysimachis (Anagallis) tenella*), Round leaved Wintergreen (*Pyrola rotundifolia*) and Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*). Large clumps of the nationally scarce Sharp Sea Rush (*Juncus acutus*) are aptly named, but we were a little early to see other Burrows rarities, the Round Headed Club-rush (*Scirpoides holoschoenus*) and Water Germander (*Teucrium scordium*) at their best. These flower later in the summer, and both are found in only one or two other UK sites.

We crossed the final few metres of Beach Head Slack, reaching the foredune via a convenient stile, taking us into the ungrazed coastal area of Marram Grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) facing the Atlantic Ocean across Saunton Beach.

The foredunes feature a different population of plants, including Sea Bindweed (*Calystegia soldanella*), Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*) and Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*). The attractive pinkish-blue-flowered Sea Stock (*Matthiola sinuata*) is locally common here on the foredune, but nationally rare.

Perhaps the most eagerly sought plant amongst our group was the Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*), of which Mary was able to show us a considerable population, tucked away in a hollow sheltered from the worst Atlantic weather.



Time was marching on, and the leaders were already making plans to change the early hotel dinner time, as the group were enjoying the Burrows botany so much. Future tours will no doubt have to allow more time to see Braunton Burrows, at its very best in late June. We thanked Mary and John and headed back to Woolacombe for the first checklist session of the tour, before dinner.

Afterwards, a smaller group headed out at 9.45pm as the night drew in, to return to Braunton in the hope of seeing Greater Horseshoe Bats (*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*). We assembled at the Countryside Centre to meet Dave Edgcombe of the AONB team, and John Breeds, who took us up the steep West Hill path to the viewing platform. This is at the edge of dense woodland, facing west in the corner of a large field. Bat detectors were deployed, and we did manage to identify one or two fleeting examples of the Common Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*), Lesser Horseshoe (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*) and just one Greater Horseshoe Bat. This was disappointing, given the reliability of sightings in previous years, and the proximity of the most important roost of the Greater Horseshoe in North Devon. A large and relatively rare bat, it feeds on large insects, especially dung beetles, and the problems of the extremely cold spring have resulted in fatalities in the roost, according to John and Dave. We thanked them and returned in torchlight to the minibuses for the 20-minute drive back to the hotel.

Day 3

Woolacombe to Heddon Valley

Wednesday 23rd June

Another beautiful clear morning dawned after the passage of a cold front overnight. We were ready to head off to Exmoor National Park by 8.45am, and drove along the high coast road with its views of the Gower and South Wales coast some 40 miles distant. We turned off northwards towards the Heddon Valley, and briefly stopped at the viewpoint at Trentishoe Down, 300 metres above the calm, hazy sea below. A Common Spotted Orchid (*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*) was found in the Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) at the edge of the car park.



Our destination was Hunter's Inn, now owned and operated by the National Trust, as part of its extensive landholdings on the North Devon coast. We met up with local National Trust volunteer expert Andy McGeeney, a Naturetrek Tour Leader in the past, and an expert on

Image: Nicola Corrigan

European butterflies and dragonflies.

After readying ourselves for the walk northwards down the valley to Heddon's Mouth, we set off down the western side, through sun drenched woodland under brilliant blue skies. We quickly spotted a Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) basking on bramble in the hedgerow. Numerous ferns decorated the banks of the path, including Black Spleenwort (*Asplenium adiantum-nigrum*), Male Fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*), Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*) Polypody (*Polypodium vulgare*), and the ever-present Hart's Tongue (*Asplenium scolopendrium*). The very poisonous Hemlock Water Dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*) lined the path, and a Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) and Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) were spotted in the fast-flowing stream to the beach. Meadow Pipits (*Anthus pratensis*) were much in evidence as we neared the rocky beach, and from the viewpoint above the shore, a lone Guillemot (*Uria aalge*) was spotted resting on a rock just offshore. Further out, Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*) wheeled on their straight wings, and Gannets (*Morus bassanus*), almost certainly from the Grassholm colony in Pembrokeshire were seen in the Bristol Channel. Occasional Shags (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) and Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) passed the beach at low level. A Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola*) called from its perch above the stream, and Sea Campion (*Silene uniflora*) and Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) were seen nearby.

As we walked back towards Hunter's Inn for an early lunch, we left a few of our group eating a snack while we retraced our steps. They chose the eastern path up the River Heddon and saw more Dippers. Once back into the woodland fringe, the first group heard and then saw a female Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) feeding in a bush above us.

A flash of emerald gave us a perfect long view of a Green Hairstreak (*Callophrys rubi*) in the same area. We also saw a Small White (*Pieris rapae*), Speckled Wood (*Parage aegeria*), and Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) on this beautiful morning walk.



We gathered at a small pond near the Inn, surrounded by Ragged Robin (*Silene flos-cuculi*) and various sedges, where we saw mating Azure Damselflies (*Coenagrion puella*).

At Hunter's Inn, we had a pleasant lunch under the shade of umbrellas, before heading back up into the wooded coombe towards the hamlet of Trentishoe. Andy told us that the best chance of seeing the rare High Brown Fritillary (*Argynnis adippe*) was on the south facing slopes of this valley, and some of the group ventured on to the steep hillside with dense bracken, nettles and brambles in flower, the latter being the food plant of the species. The access was not ideal, and Andy made a note to ask the National Trust team to make things a little easier for visitors.

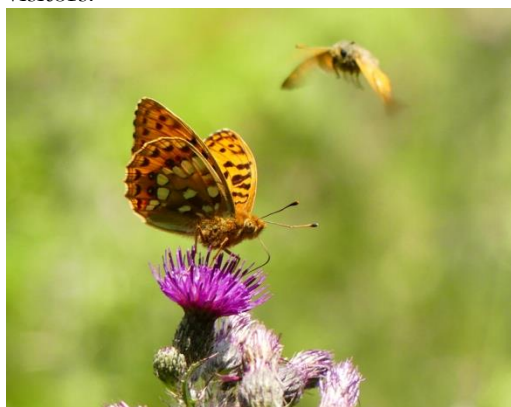


Image: Charles Kinsey

We were successful in finding these elusive butterflies, but initially found their identification difficult. Charles Kinsey snapped the shot of the tour, and we were able to confirm the subtle underwing differences between the High Brown and Dark Green Fritillary (*Argynnis aglaja*), both of which are present in this habitat.

Andy was also able to find us a very accommodating Golden-ringed Dragonfly (*Cordulegaster boltonii*) basking in the warm sunshine on the same slope.

Those who were understandably unwilling to tackle the prickly slopes were led by Nicola up to the tiny church in Trentishoe. Inside, they found a large roost of bats, later confirmed as Lesser Horseshoes (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*). This superb find perhaps made up for the lack of bats the previous evening!



Image:Nicola

Corrigan

In the porch of the church, a pair of Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) had made their nest. When we caught up with the group later, Andy confirmed there were five eggs. On the way up the hill, this second group had seen a Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) hunting insects in the village. The two parties joined up on the high footpath above the village and then headed back to Hunter's Inn, where the group had been asked to gather at 4pm to return to Woolacombe. We thanked Andy for his sterling work as our guide at very short notice, due to a COVID-19 outbreak affecting the regional National Trust team.

After an early dinner, we gathered in the ballroom to compare notes on a second wonderful day in a completely different habitat. The group were keen to conserve energy for the next day's exciting visit to Lundy, and most went off early to bed.

Day 4

Thursday 24th June

Woolacombe to Ilfracombe to Lundy

After delivery of breakfast boxes to our rooms at 7am, the group assembled at 8am for an early departure to Ilfracombe and the MS Oldenburg passenger ferry to Lundy. The ferry was running at 50% capacity due to COVID-19, but as we had arrived so promptly in Ilfracombe, we headed up the queue and secured the best outside seats for sea-watching on a rather misty morning.



The Oldenburg departed promptly at 10am and we soon spotted a small group of distant cetaceans inshore of us, from their colouration possibly Bottlenose Dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) or Harbour Porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*), moving along the coast from Lee.

Seabirds, including Gannet (*Morus bassana*), Shag (*Phalacrocrax aristotelis*) and Guillemot (*Uria aalge*) passed the ship to and fro to Morte Point. Few more sightings were made until we neared Lundy under brightening skies.

Several Manx Shearwaters (*Puffinus puffinus*) were seen, part of a growing seabird colony since the elimination of rats on the island. A new study published (May 2021) by RSPB, showed a tripling of seabird numbers on Lundy to over 21,000 birds. Key species such as Manx



Shearwater have increased to more than 5,500 pairs with Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) now numbering 375 birds.



Grey

Seal Image: Charles Kinsey

As we neared the Lundy jetty, some of our group on the port side had a fleeting glimpse of a Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) just offshore. Nearer the ship, Atlantic Grey Seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) were seen hauled out and in the shallows. Oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*) called from the surrounding rocks.

A pair of Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*) eyed the scene, while Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*) called and wheeled around the bay. We disembarked ahead of schedule and started the long hot climb up to the church, pub and village, to the distant calls of a Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*) further to the south of us. At the side of the track, we saw the endemic Lundy Cabbage (*Coinceya wrightii*) in flower, with Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*), Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*) and Peacock (*Inachis io*) all in evidence. At the top, a wildflower meadow with Sea Carrot (*Daucus carota gummifera*) and Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) greeted us, while Large White (*Pieris brassicae*), Small White (*Pieris rapae*) Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*) and Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) butterflies were all seen in the sunshine.

The group had made Puffin viewing a priority, so after catching our breath, we headed off past the lighthouse towards the west coast and the main seabird colony. Ominously, the fog which had been forecast had started to obscure the lighthouse, but we headed on, spotting Meadow Pipits (*Anthus pratensis*) and one or two Northern Wheatears (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) which breed on Lundy, en route, taking up perches on the fences and old stone walls. We passed small groups of Exmoor ponies and Soay sheep, effectively deployed as part of habitat management. After an hour's walking, we started to first smell, and then hear the calls, of thousands of seabirds on the cliffs below, but the view was beginning to be obscured by mist coming in off the Atlantic

As we reached Jenny's Cove, we stopped to view the Guillemots and Razorbills (*Alca torde*) lining every available horizontal ledge and rafting on the sea some 100 metres below. Puffins were sighted flying at low level, but we were unable to locate their burrows on the steep grassy slopes. We moved to a different viewpoint, slightly further north, and found a small group of visitors straining their eyes through the mist. We were too late - beaten by the fog. We had little spare time now to get back to the village and a welcome cup of tea before embarking at 4pm. We met up as a group once more, as one of our number had taken a gentler tour run by the National Trust.

Roger Hull saw an adult and two juvenile Peregrines (*Falco peregrinus*) flying above the southern cliffs. Linnets (*Linaria cannabina*) and feral goats were also seen on the grassland plateau of the island.

Inevitably, the fog lifted as we departed the jetty in brilliant sunshine, while a few Puffins were spotted alongside the Oldenburg. Once again, we were able to secure prime outside seats for sea watching. Puffins, Guillemots and Manx Shearwaters were seen close to the ship, but regrettably, no cetaceans on a smooth sea with very light winds.



Image: Charles Kinsey

A Grey Seal was spotted coming to the surface, tackling a large Skate (*Raja undulata*). We made good time, and docked early in Ilfracombe. We were back at the hotel in good time for our more relaxed final dinner – the first that we had not had to pre-order in the morning, to help the pandemic-stretched chef.

Day 5

Woolacombe to Morteheo

Friday 25th June

The nearby location of our final morning's exploration was to be Morteheo, only two miles from the hotel. We were thus able to enjoy a relaxing breakfast, and plenty of time for packing our bags before departure. We had decided to take the steep coast road up to Morteheo village, some 150 metres above us, but were thwarted by the local bus service taking up the width of the narrow road, facing a long queue of visitor traffic coming down the hill. We cut our losses and took the long way round, meeting up with our local guide, Dave Jenkins, who has lived in Morteheo for nearly 80 years, becoming a particular expert on the local Atlantic Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) population. Morteheo has become a regular haul-out for females during the summer, but they move further south to Cornwall's secluded coves, to give birth and mate later in the year.

We walked through the pretty village, past the church and one of the two pubs, up the lane to towards Morte Point, which marks the end of the Bristol Channel and the beginning of the open Atlantic Ocean, with distant views of Lundy. We headed down one of the tracks leading north-west over the spinal ridge of Morte, joining the South-west Coast Path.

Dave asked us to split into two groups, and while one group waited, taking in the splendid view eastwards to Rockham Bay and Bull Point, he took the other about 50 metres along the path to view at close hand the nest of a pair of European Kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*) with three juveniles close to fledging, in a crevice on the cliff below.



We watched spellbound as both parents came to and fro. A small crowd had started to gather, so we moved on in search of Morte Point's Grey Seals which favour a low tide haul-out about half-way along the Point. We were in luck and watched at least six individuals, all females, for 20 minutes at a safe distance. Disturbance is a problem in other areas of the South West, but the cliffs make access difficult here, while still allowing great views.



Time was running short again – another pointer for changes before the 2022 tour, so we were unable to complete the walk around Morte Point in time for lunch. We retraced our steps along grassy paths in the Gorse and noticed the strange bird's nest effect of the parasitical Dodder (*Cuscuta epithymum*), in colours from yellow to deep red, that lives amongst the Gorse. We had lunch at the Ship Aground in Morteheo, and by 1.30pm it was time for Martin to take six of the group back to Tiverton Parkway for their trains home. Nicola bade farewell to the remaining clients at the hotel, and the first Naturetrek Tour of North Devon came to a very successful end.

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Checklist

Birds