

South Devon in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 4th November 2022



Cattle Egrets



Black-tailed Godwits



Brent Geese



Spotted Redshank with Redshanks

Tour report by Mike Langman and Neil Glenn, photos by Mike Langman



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Tour participants: Mike Langman and Neil Glenn (leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients

Summary

The Exe estuary and surrounding hills and heaths make for a varied early winter birding tour. The area is well supported with well-known reserves: RSPB Exminster Marshes, Bowling Green Marsh and Aylesbeare Common, the National Nature Reserve at Dawlish Warren and Forestry Commission Haldon Forest. The estuary holds thousands of wintering wildfowl and waders, the heaths with Dartford Warblers and Stonechats and the forested hills with its finches and feeding station. An early November tour combines the excitement of late Autumn migration with the arrival of many wintering species.

Day 1

Tuesday 1st November

With Exeter trains running to time and some of the group having stayed in Exeter the night before our minibuses were loaded and ready to go by 1.30pm

Heading to the Royal Beacon Hotel in Exmouth to deposit luggage, we made a brief stop at Exmouth Mud Bank Lane for our first look over the Exe Estuary - on a perfect falling tide. Numerous waders and wildfowl were present. The biggest flocks were of dark-bellied Brent Geese (three pale-bellied too!), Wigeon and Oystercatcher with smaller numbers of Black-tailed Godwits, Dunlin, Redshank, Pintail and Shelduck. Among the Black-headed, Common and Herring Gulls were plenty of Little Egrets.

A threatening cloud bank saw us make a hasty retreat to the vehicles before heading off to the Hotel. Planning to drop the bags and go - the hotel rooms were ready for us, so instead a quick check-in with bags in rooms worked well. The rain had passed, brighter skies and slackening wind meant a visit to the heaths looked promising. With dark clouds and almost fluorescent rainbow disappearing away from us, we were greeted with blue skies at the RSPB Aylesbeare Common reserve. Within minutes of arrival we were enjoying watching Fieldfares feeding on Holly berries, several Stonechats plus their faithful companion species and our main target – Dartford Warbler, least three individuals were seen.

Back at the Hotel – checklist/log call, instructions for the following day and dinner before retiring for the night.

Day 2

Wednesday 2nd November

The day's weather forecast suggested we were in for a tricky day! Luckily the heavy rain forecast prediction had moved back an hour leaving a mostly dry day. A short pre-breakfast amble produced a bit of vis-mig (visible migration) with a few finch species and Wood Pigeons.

Sticking to our planned itinerary Dawlish Warren was our first birding location. Behind the dunes there was at least some shelter from the blustery SSW wind. Among the willows and birch trees a tit flock produced Long-tailed, Great & Blue Tit, several Chiffchaffs and a Goldcrest. Some anxious Blackbirds and a Wren were mobbing a Tawny Owl although it was virtually impossible to see in the swaying trees.

Crossing over the dunes - to the beach and scanning the sea, some distant Gannets fished but very little else was noted. Arriving at the Bight at high tide waders had begun to gather. Sadly the viewing opportunities, and access here in poor weather are becoming worse year on year due to coastal dune erosion. We did see hundreds of Oystercatchers, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Sanderling and a single Bar-tailed Godwit. Out on the estuary three Grey Seals were found loafing in some pontoons.

Heading back along the beach we felt the full force of the wind and sand blasting! Finding some shelter below the dunes a few birds showed but nothing different than earlier. On the pool a single Teal retreated into the reeds and a Cetti's Warbler sang briefly.

Lunch snacks purchased (pasties and sandwiches) we settled beside Dawlish Brook (Water) watching Mallards, Moorhens, Pied Wagtails and a couple of Brown Trout. A stroll up the brook was productive with several sightings of two Dippers and a Grey Wagtail.

The next planned stop was Exminster Marshes but with a deluge due in the next hour a decision was made to search for Cirl Buntings at Dawlish Country Park. The strong winds made it difficult to locate the birds and then when found they darted immediately into cover. Eventually and just as heavy rain arrived several Cirl Buntings showed well on telegraph wires.

With covered and dry afternoon options offered: 1. Coffee and cake stop at Darts Farm or 2. Walk to Bowling Green Marsh hide - the coffee stop won hands down! With no let-up with the rain and after a bit of retail therapy at the RSPB and outdoor clothing shops we headed back to the Hotel.

Evening log call, briefing for Thursday, dinner and then bar or bed!

Day 3

Thursday 3rd November

Meeting at 06.45am for a pre breakfast walk - those attending divided into two groups one walking from the hotel down to the seafront hearing an autumn dawn chorus and seeing Chiffchaff and Goldcrests plus finches leaving their roost. The others driving to the rocks off the east end of Exmouth seafront finding Rock Pipit, Turnstones and a very late juvenile Arctic Tern.

Breakfast over our first stop was the seafront again to see a female Eider albeit distant. Onto Shelly Beach to try and track down a newly arrived Black Redstart. Sadly it showed only briefly on a rooftop aerial and could not be found again. However while searching the area plenty of Brent Geese, a Kingfisher, Reed Bunting, Sparrowhawk and Red-breasted Merganser were found.

Arriving at Topsham and scanning the estuary from the Goat Walk plenty of waders were picked out even in the challenging glary light. Good numbers of Black-tailed Godwits, hundreds of Golden Plover, Lapwings, Avocet and Grey Plovers. Among the Redshanks a Spotted Redshank swished its bill through a small pool of muddy water. The background bubbling calls of Curlew, on a still sunny day, made the birdwatching experience so much more enjoyable. A distant Goshawk was spotted being mobbed by three Carrion Crows. Further down river a feeding Great Crested Grebe made life difficult for anyone trying to see it through a telescope, as it spent more time under water.

Walking toward the Clyst viewing platform we discovered some Stock Doves, Goldcrests and heard a Cetti's Warbler. From the raised platform plenty of Redshank and a few Grey Plovers fed on the opposite muddy bank, also one Avocet. A Kingfisher perched on a seawall and a Green Woodpecker fed in a grassy field.

As expected Bowling Green Marsh hide on a high tide was busy but the accommodating birders shuffled around to make room for our group. After picking out the many Pintail, Shoveler, Teal a couple of Egyptian Geese, Greylag Geese and even a Mandarin Duck. A scan of the Black-tailed Godwit and Redshank flocks added Greenshank, Bar-tailed Godwit and the Spotted Redshank.

Settling in for our packed lunches and teas and coffee from 'the lookout' side of the hide - a heron descending into the marsh was quickly identified by our group as a juvenile Purple Heron! There was quite a commotion in the hide as some did and some didn't see the bird before it dropped into cover out of sight! For some the bird was picked up briefly as it moved along the back of the marsh.

It was time to move on to Haldon. The feeding station here was alive with Siskins, Goldfinches, Coal Tits, Chaffinches plus a Great Spotted Woodpecker. A search of nearby woodland produced nothing different but Nuthatch was heard. Dropping down to some lower woodland we waited for finches to go to roost. A single Hawfinch perched up but only two of the group saw it before it dropped into cover to roost. Another probable dropped into the same copse. Other birds in the area included Long-tailed Tits, Goldcrest and another Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Prior to evening dinner the checklist was completed and plans for the last day explained.

Day 4

Friday 4th November

Bags packed, breakfast finished and all checked out, a last look over Exmouth seafront revealed several shags and some Turnstones, overhead a few flocks of Wood Pigeon, Skylark and finches were noted. Soon it was time to drive to RSPB Exminster Marshes. First stop was the Fisherman's car park from here there is an elevated view over the marshes. Flocks of Lapwing, Canada Geese, Wigeon and some flighty Teal could be seen. Three birds of prey were spotted a Kestrel, Buzzard and one of our target species - Marsh Harrier, an immature male. Another Marsh Harrier put in an appearance further away – probably an immature female.

Walking along the canal a Kingfisher flew past, several Cetti's Warblers sang and in the bushes Redwing were present. A cattle field downstream produced another target bird, this time, a Cattle Egret in the company of a Little Egret enabling a good comparison.

A short drive back over the railway parking the buses at our lunch stop location - but not before a stroll toward RSPB Powderham Marshes and the bird crop fields. Along the way two more Cattle Egrets were busy feeding around a small herd of cattle. Kestrels and a Sparrowhawk put on a good show and a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew over.

At the bird crop fields the commonest finch present were Linnets accompanied by Goldfinch and plenty of Greenfinch. In the hedgerow Reed Buntings and several Cirl Buntings proved challenging to see well. A field with

some standing sunflowers held Stonechats and Meadow Pipits. Before returning to the Swan's Nest pub a pair of Ravens hounded by several Carrion Crows made a hasty retreat.

Drinks ordered, the final log call added several species not seen during the previous few days. A round the table discussion revealed Cirl Bunting was the favourite bird of the tour, perhaps unsurprising as it is Devon's very special bird and colourful too! Meals arrived and enjoyed it was time to head off to Exeter Railway station and our final goodbyes.

Considering the rather stormy forecast for the week, which luckily was inaccurate, the tour really wasn't altered hugely. The variety of locations, habitats and birds plus some really great sightings made for an exciting few days with a lovely group.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific	November 2022			
		1	2	3	4
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			2	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Brent Goose (Dark & Pale-bellied)	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		2		
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	1	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓		✓	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓	✓
Mandarin	<i>Aix galericulata</i>				1
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			1	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			1	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			1	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓	✓
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>				1 Imm
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				3
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				3
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		1		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓		✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓	✓	
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>				H
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</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>		✓		
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		1	✓	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>			1	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓		✓	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓	✓
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓		

Common name	Scientific	November 2022			
		1	2	3	4
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus 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>		✓	✓	✓
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>			1 Juv	
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>			✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		LO		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			2	1
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓	2
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			1	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓	H
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Carion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				2
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓		✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	H	H
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	3			
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			H	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓		✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	2	1	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>			1	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	6	✓	✓	✓
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		2		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			✓	

		November 2022			
Common name	Scientific	1	2	3	4
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓	✓		✓
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes Coccothraustes</i>			1	
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓		✓
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓	✓

Others

		November 2022			
Common names	Scientific	1	2	3	4
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		3		
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	1		✓	✓
Brown Trout	<i>Salmo trutta</i>		✓		
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	✓	✓
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	✓
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>				✓
Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna mixta</i>				1