

Devon, species list and trip report, 14th to 18th February 2022

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



Devon 2022

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#	DATE	LOCATIONS AND NOTES
1	14 th February	Arrival at Bickley Mill, Devon.
2	15 th February	Stover Country Park, Exe estuary cruise.
3	16 th February	Somerset Levels.
4	17 th February	Brixham, Broadsands.
5	18 th February	Depart.



Cover: Grey Seal. Above: Avocets.

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Day One: 14th February. Arrival in Devon.

Our Devon tour began in the evening at Bickley Mill Inn, a lovely 13th century restored mill near Kingskerswell, which would be our base for the next few days. After an introduction to the holiday and a discussion of the upcoming itinerary, we enjoyed getting to know each other over a drink and our first meal together. We then retired to bed in readiness for tomorrow's excursions.

Day Two: 15th February. Stover Country Park, Exe estuary cruise.

It was a rather damp start as we met our driver Peter and drove the short distance to Stover Country Park, an area of mixed woodland surrounding a scenic lake, which supports a range of wildfowl and woodland bird species. Soon after arriving we saw several Mandarin Ducks, with the gaudy plumage of the males and the more subtle beauty of the females helping to brighten the overcast conditions. It was interesting to watch a moment of courtship behaviour, as a female gently but persistently encouraged her partner to reaffirm their bond. Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Moorhen, Coot and Mallard were all close by, with Wigeon and Tufted Duck a little further out on the lake.

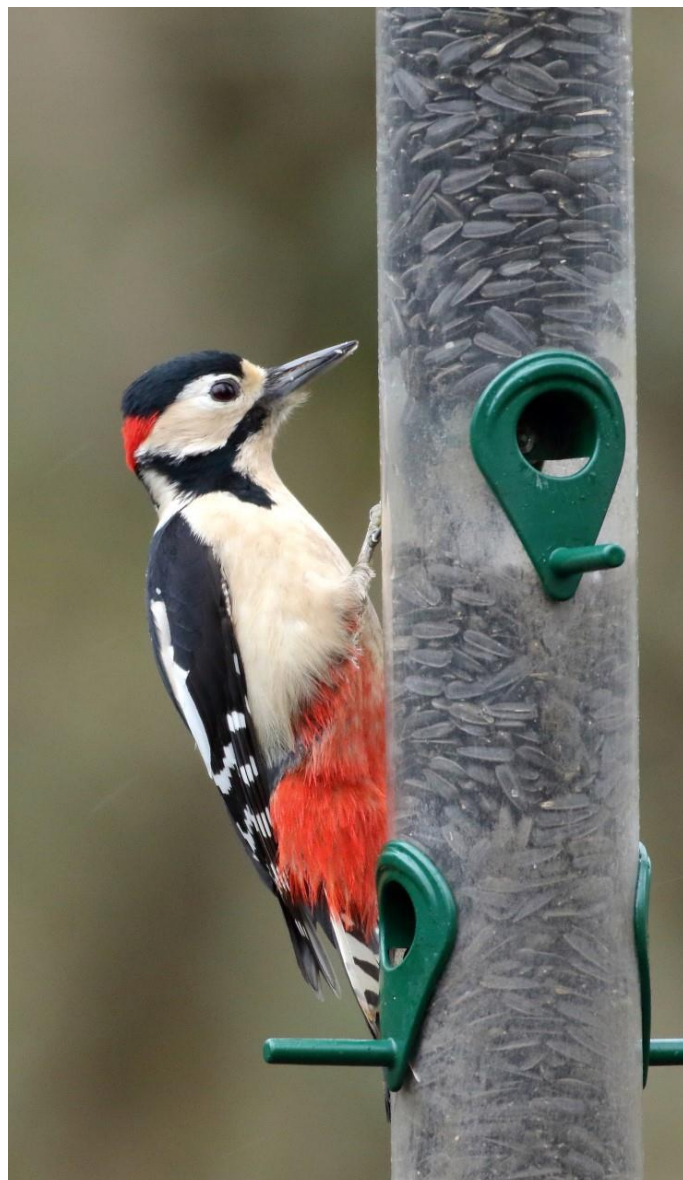
As we walked around the lake we noted Shoveler, Pochard and a shy Gadwall trying to avoid detection under some overhanging vegetation. We then explored an aerial walkway where a feeder has been set up in the canopy to attract woodland birds; amongst the Chaffinches, Robins, Blue and Great Tits, we also enjoyed views of Marsh Tit, Nuthatch and a handsome male Great Spotted Woodpecker.

By now it was time to move on to the Exe estuary for our boat cruise. The estuary has been designated internationally for its birdlife, in particular for its importance to the flocks of Dark-bellied Brent Geese and Icelandic-race Black-tailed Godwits, which spend their winters here. We spent the next three hours slowly exploring this fantastic site, first heading to the river mouth before sailing upriver to Topsham.

Along the way we encountered a wide range of birds, including the aforementioned Dark-bellied Brent Geese, elegant Pintail, Teal, Great Crested Grebe, Little Egret, Red-breasted Merganser, Shelduck, Cormorant and Shag, watching how the latter makes a more pronounced leap out of the water when it dives than the larger Cormorant.

Wading birds were well represented and during the cruise we saw Oystercatcher, the iconic Avocet, Dunlin, Sanderling, Curlew, both Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwit, Golden and Grey Plover, Turnstone, Redshank and a single Spotted Redshank, a rare visitor to the estuary. We also took time to appreciate a Common Seal resting on a sandbank - not that common here so good to see, and close to the boat too, offering great views.

By now the rain had stopped, the sun briefly showed itself, and we had warmed ourselves with a delicious pasty and a hot drink as we enjoyed the spectacle of the Exe estuary at its finest. After returning to dry land, we re-joined the bus and drove back to the hotel, where there was time to freshen up before dinner and to review the day's key sightings.



Left to right: Mandarin Duck; Great Spotted Woodpecker; Red-breasted Merganser; Common Seal.

Day Three: 16th February. Somerset Levels.

Today we ventured north into Somerset, to explore the marshes and reedbeds of Ham Wall and Shapwick Heath nature reserves. This extensive area of old peat cuttings is now a haven for wildlife, with large numbers of wintering birds choosing to take advantage of this important wetland site.

We began at Ham Wall RSPB reserve, and as we entered the site we heard the explosive song of the Cetti's Warbler, proclaiming its territory from dense scrub cover. Further on we came to a series of viewing areas and a small hide overlooking the reedbeds and lagoons, and here we noted a range of species including Shoveler, Teal, Pintail, Tufted Duck, Wigeon, Pochard, Lapwing, Little Grebe and a pair of nest-building Great Crested Grebes. We also enjoyed much better views of Gadwall, and managed to pick out one or two Snipe skulking amongst an area of cut reeds, where their cryptically marked plumage helped them to blend in (almost) perfectly with their surroundings.

Grey Herons could be seen investigating potential nesting sites in the reeds, and we spent some time appreciating the rare sight of a Little Egret and a much larger Great White Egret standing next to each other; there are not many places in the UK where such a sighting is possible, but thankfully the Great White Egret is doing well here and increasing in numbers - last year 50 chicks fledged across the wider area, the highest count so far. Alas the Bittern, another success story for the reserve, remained elusive - clearly they were keeping their heads down in the windy weather!

Marsh Harriers on the other hand showed remarkably well, affording prolonged views of both male and female birds as they quartered over the reeds, spooking the Lapwing and wildfowl as they did so. It was great to see these impressive raptors, which are another highly characteristic bird of the local area that seem to be going from strength to strength. Looking downwards, a clump of flowering Lesser Celandine signalled that spring was not too far around the corner...

In the afternoon we crossed over the road and visited the neighbouring Shapwick Heath nature reserve, which lies to the west of Ham Wall. We had been reliably informed that the wintering Starling flock had been roosting here over the last few nights, so we went to try our luck. While we waited for the Starlings to arrive we picked our way through a flock of wildfowl carefully checking the Tufted Duck until we found a rarity that has been frequenting the area - a Ring-necked Duck. This North American visitor is very similar to our Tufted Duck, but can be distinguished in part by its rather different head shape, which is peaked at the hind-crown and lacks a tuft. Water Rails revealed their presence by squealing from the reedbed, and birds seen flying overhead included Great Spotted Woodpecker, Pied Wagtail and a small flock of Redwing.

A sense of anticipation grew as we saw the first small groups of Starlings flying in, then larger flocks, but frustratingly they remained mostly hidden from view behind some trees. Then we saw a very large flock further along the canal, and just as we were deciding whether to move position or stay put, a large flock came over the trees and began to perform right in front of us. The sight of several thousand Starlings swirling above in the fading light was a fantastic way to end our day on the Somerset Levels, and satisfied we returned to the hotel to reflect upon a long but rewarding day.

Devon, species list and trip report, 14th to 18th February 2022



Left to right: Gadwall; Little Egret and Great White Egret; Starlings coming in to roost at Shapwick Heath.

Day Four: 17th February. Brixham, Broadsands.

We were greeted by blue sky and sunshine as we headed towards the coast, to the picturesque fishing town of Brixham. We began by walking along the half-mile breakwater, but hadn't gone far before we spotted a Grey Seal bobbing in the water and slowly making its way along the inside of the breakwater. We paused to pick out some Kittiwakes, and compared the adult and juvenile plumages as they perched side by side; these delicate gulls were dwarfed by the huge Great Black-backed Gulls which periodically flew past us. Cormorant and Shag were seen, as were a couple of Razorbill and a distant Gannet offshore.

As we progressed further along the breakwater we came to an old jetty, and here we saw one of the special birds of the area, a small flock of Purple Sandpiper. These hardy waders spend the winter in small flocks at sites along the south coast, preferring to feed amongst wave-battered, seaweed covered rocks, and they are often to be found in the locality.

At the lighthouse which marks the end of the breakwater we looked down on to the rocks and found another of the characteristic local birds - a Turnstone. This individual was incredibly tame and approached to within a few feet of us, leading to the sound of appreciative camera clicks all round. A Rock Pipit also foraged nearby, though perhaps not getting the attention it deserved due to the endearing antics of the Turnstone!

A few sharp showers were approaching so we headed back to the café, stopping briefly to identify Danish Scurvy-grass which was coming into flower on the breakwater, and to watch another Grey Seal at close quarters, looking up at us inquisitively.

After a welcome hot drink, we walked around to the inner harbour area to check for divers, but we weren't in luck and so we returned to the café for lunch. Fully sated, we boarded the bus for the short drive north to Broadsands, a sheltered sandy beach just south of Paignton. Our main target here was a real Devon speciality, the Cirl Bunting. A long-running feeding area has been in operation at the site and numbers of this rare bird have increased significantly over the years. It didn't take us long to find them, feeding with House Sparrows and Chaffinches at the side of the car park - success! We crept closer and watched for some time, admiring the birds' striking head pattern and colouration.

Dragging ourselves away from the Cirl Buntings, we walked to the beach which was very busy with people and unfortunately there were few birds to be seen. We did manage to spot two distant Great Northern Divers out in the bay, but apart from Cormorants and a small flock of Meadow Pipits the area was fairly quiet. On the botanical front, we found a couple of imposing Tree Mallow specimens, the umbellifer Alexanders with its yellowish flowers, and the low-growing Musk Stork's-bill was locally frequent beside the footpath behind the beach.

All too soon it was time to return to the bus and head back to the hotel. We thanked Peter for looking after us and for all his skilful driving, before we enjoyed one final meal together at Bickley Mill Inn and looked back on some great sightings from our time over the last few days in the West Country.

Mike Symes, Wildlife Travel. February 2022.

Devon, species list and trip report, 14th to 18th February 2022



Left to right: Cirl Bunting; Purple Sandpiper; Grey Seal; Turnstone.

Devon, species list and trip report, 14th to 18th February 2022

DEVON 2022: some highlights

H = heard only; S = signs

	ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	5
BIRDS							
Family Anatidae (Swans, geese and ducks)							
	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		◆			
	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		◆	◆		
	Dark-Bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla bernicla</i>		◆			
	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		◆			
	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		◆	◆		
	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		◆	◆		
	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		◆	◆		
	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		◆	◆		
	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		◆	◆		
	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		◆	◆		
	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		◆	◆		
	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		◆	◆		
	Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>			◆		
	Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>		◆			
	Red-Breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		◆			
Family Phasianidae (Pheasants and partridges)							
	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		◆			
Family Gaviidae (Divers)							
	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>				◆	
Family Podicipedidae (Grebes)							
	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			◆		
	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		◆	◆		
Family Sulidae (Gannets)							
	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				◆	
Family Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants)							
	(Great) Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		◆		◆	
Family Ardeidae (Hérons)							
	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		◆	◆		
	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			◆		
	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		◆	◆		
Family Accipitridae (Hawks and Eagles)							
	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			◆		
	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			◆	◆	
Family Falconidae (Falcons)							

Devon, species list and trip report, 14th to 18th February 2022

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	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			◆		
Family Rallidae (Rails and Crakes)							
	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			H		
	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		◆	◆		
	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		◆	◆		
Family Haematopidae (Oystercatchers)							
	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		◆			
Family Recurvirostridae (Avocets)							
	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		◆			
Family Scolopacidae (Sandpipers)							
	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		◆			
	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		◆			
	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				◆	
	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			◆		
	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		◆		◆	
	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		◆			
	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		◆			
	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		◆			
	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		◆			
	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		◆			
Family Charadriidae (Plovers)							
	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		◆			
	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		◆			
	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			◆		
Family Laridae (Gulls)							
	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				◆	
	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		◆			
	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		◆		◆	
	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		◆	◆		
	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		◆		◆	
Family Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)							
	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		◆		◆	
	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		◆	◆	◆	
Family Picidae (Woodpeckers)							
	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		◆	◆		
Family Motacillidae (Pipits and Wagtails)							
	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				◆	
	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				◆	
	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>			◆		
Family Troglodytidae (Wrens)							
	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		◆	◆	H	

Devon, species list and trip report, 14th to 18th February 2022

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	Family Prunellidae (Accentors)						
	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			H	◆	
	Family Muscicapidae (Flycatchers and Chats)						
	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Family Turdidae (Thrushes)						
	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				H	
	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			◆		
	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Family Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers)						
	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H		
	Family Paridae (Tits)						
	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		◆	◆		
	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecilus palustris</i>		◆			
	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		◆	◆		
	Family Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)						
	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			◆		
	Family Sittidae (Nuthatches)						
	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		◆			
	Family Corvidae (Crows)						
	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>			◆		
	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			◆		
	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		◆	◆		
	Family Sturnidae (Starlings)						
	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		◆	◆		
	Family Passeridae (Sparrows)						
	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			◆	◆	
	Family Fringillidae (Finches)						
	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			◆		
	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				◆	
	Family Emberizidae (Buntings)						
	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			◆		
	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				◆	

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MAMMALS							
Carnivores							
	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				◆	
	Common (Harbour) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		◆			
Rodents, insectivores and lagomorphs							
	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			◆		
	Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		◆			
Ungulates							
	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			S		

	ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	5
SELECTED PLANTS							
	Winter Heliotrope	<i>Petasites fragrans</i>		◆			
	Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>		◆	◆		
	Stinking Iris	<i>Iris foetidissima</i>		◆			
	Lesser Celandine	<i>Ficaria verna</i>		◆	◆		
	Alexanders	<i>Smyrniolum olusatrum</i>				◆	
	Tree Mallow	<i>Lavatera arborea</i>				◆	
	Musk Stork's-bill	<i>Erodium moschatum</i>				◆	
	Danish Scurvy-grass	<i>Cochlearia danica</i>				◆	
	Blackthorn	<i>Prunus spinosa</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	European Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>			◆	◆	
	Red Dead-nettle	<i>Lamium purpureum</i>			◆		