

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



Devon, species list and trip report, 16th to 20th January 2023

#	DATE	LOCATIONS AND NOTES
1	16 th January	Arrival at Bickley Mill, Devon.
2	17 th January	Brixham, Broadsands.
3	18 th January	Somerset Levels.
4	19 th January	Exe estuary cruise, Stover Country Park.
5	20 th January	Depart.

Leader

Mike Symes

Devon

A gallery of photos from the trip is at

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/wildlifetravel/albums/72177720305613619/with/52656382056/>



Cover: Purple Sandpiper. Above: Grey Seal.

Day One: 16th January. Arrival at Bickley Mill, 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: 17th January. Brixham, Broadsands.

We met up with our driver Peter on a cold winter's morning to take a journey southwards to Torbay. After negotiating the narrow lanes near the hotel, we joined the traffic on the outskirts of Paignton before heading down to the pretty fishing town of Brixham. We parked by the breakwater and slowly walked along this half-mile structure to see what was sheltering in the harbour area. Almost immediately we saw our first Grey Seal, looking at us inquisitively from the water, whilst behind there were several more hauled out on the wavescreen which marks the boundary of the marina; these individuals were quite entertaining as they squabbled with each other and jostled for the most comfortable resting position.

Shags were numerous, including one or two at very close range, and it was interesting to note that a few of the birds were already showing their characteristic breeding plumage crests. We also watched as they leapt clear of the water when diving, in much more enthusiastic fashion than their larger relative the Cormorant.

We picked out a Black-throated Diver which remained frustratingly distant, and then a Great Northern Diver a little closer in which allowed better views. There was some quality to be found amongst the gull species on show – alongside the Black-headed, Herring and hulking Great Black-backed Gulls, we found a pristine Mediterranean Gull and a dainty Little Gull which flew over our heads on to the seaward side of the breakwater. One or two Gannets passed by offshore, no doubt trying to locate the shoals of fish in the bay, and two Dark-bellied Brent Geese flew east following the coastline in the direction of Berry Head.

As we progressed further along the breakwater we saw a couple of Purple Sandpipers on the old jetty, before finding another bird much closer, foraging on seaweed-covered rocks below us. These great little waders are one of the specialities of the area, and one of our main targets for the day, so we spent some time taking photos and admiring how it probed the rocks for food, occasionally dodging the incoming waves.

By now the cold was starting to seep into our bones so we began to retrace our steps and head towards the nearby café for a welcome hot drink. On the way back we saw Rock Pipit, more Grey Seals, another small group of very close Purple Sandpipers, and enjoyed fantastic views of presumably the same Mediterranean Gull that we had seen earlier, only this time it was much closer, and treated us to a couple of eye-level fly pasts where we could clearly note the key identification features of this species.

After hot drinks we took a brief stroll round to the inner harbour, where the highlight was undoubtedly the sighting of a Great Northern Diver at very close range – a beautiful bird! We returned to the café for lunch, and then a short ride in the bus to neighbouring Broadsands, a sandy beach

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surrounded by farmland and scrub on the southern edge of Paignton. Here there is a long-running feeding area for Cirl Buntings, and numbers of this rare Devon speciality have increased significantly over the years. Soon after we arrived a Robin, Chaffinch and two Dunnocks took their chances feeding around the Magpies, Crows and Herring Gulls which were also present, and then suddenly a lovely male Cirl Bunting appeared, with its striking yellow and black head pattern on full show. This immaculate bird remained in view for a few minutes before flying off into nearby bushes, leaving behind a happy group of Wildlife Travellers!

Next we decided to scan the sea, and although the bay initially seemed quiet, after a while of careful searching we found Great Crested and Slavonian Grebes, another Great Northern Diver and an elegant Red-throated Diver to complete our set of all three British divers. We returned to the car park in the hope of finding more buntings, but alas we had to make do with fly over Greenfinches and Meadow Pipits instead.

We headed back to the bus to return to Bickley Mill Inn, where after some time to freshen up, we met up again for dinner and the chance to go over some of the highlights of a successful first day in Devon.



Top to bottom: Mediterranean Gull; Grey Seal; Purple Sandpiper; Great Northern Diver.

Day Three: 18th January. Somerset Levels.

We woke this morning to a light dusting of snow as we met up with Peter to venture north into Somerset, to explore the marshes and reedbeds of Ham Wall RSPB reserve. 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. As we negotiated the icy path on to the reserve we crossed over a canal where Grey Heron, Little Egret and Great White Egret were all seen, patiently stalking in the shallow water near the bankside vegetation. The two egret species were right next to each other, and we could clearly see just how much bigger the Great White Egret is; this rare bird obviously finds the area to its liking, as it is doing well here and increasing in numbers.

We continued to the first viewing platform, pausing to watch a Song Thrush and the first of many confiding Robins, which would accompany us during the day. A few Chiffchaff flitted around the low scrub, a Cetti's Warbler could be heard giving its explosive song from the reeds, and a Water Rail squealed from the dense cover.

From the viewing platform we noted Teal, Wigeon, Pochard, Tufted Duck, lots of Shoveler, and both Great Crested and Little Grebes, the wildfowl being spooked from time to time by the passing Marsh Harriers, which were almost constantly in view quartering over the reeds and pool edges. A Kingfisher shot past in front of us, one or two Reed Buntings perched atop the reeds and our third egret species of the day appeared in the form of a Cattle Egret, which flew over the main lagoon in the company of a Little Egret.

We then explored the area to the south, where there were numerous Gadwall, Shoveler and Coot, and we also stopped to appreciate the cryptic camouflage of several Snipe which were resting on a small island of cut reeds. Unfortunately, the camouflage of the Bittern was even more effective – despite much searching, this charismatic reedbed specialist, which is going from strength to strength at Ham Wall, was not going to give itself up and remained elusive...

After a picnic lunch sheltering from the keen breeze, we continued eastwards into the reserve, where we enjoyed further great views of hunting Marsh Harriers, and were also thrilled to see a Barn Owl flying low over the reeds in the distance. The owl's plumage seemed to be quite dark, so we proposed that it was probably a female bird, and the fact that it was active quite early in the afternoon may have been due to the very cold weather: during such weather, Field Voles are often more active by day rather than at night (when it's a bit warmer), so to catch them the owls need to hunt during the daytime.

By now we were in need of a warm up so we returned to the bus for a break, before heading out again to join the gathering crowd in eager anticipation of one of nature's great spectacles: the famous Starling roost. After a few cold minutes waiting, we saw the first small groups of Starlings fly in, then some larger flocks. Some of the birds flew further out over the distant reedbeds, but many of them swirled around and then started to cascade down into the reeds in front of us. More and more birds joined them, and in the fading light we watched the reeds turn black as several thousand tightly packed Starlings crammed ever closer together – a spectacular end to our visit to this fabulous nature reserve.

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Satisfied, we returned to base to reflect upon a long but rewarding day on the Somerset Levels, before turning our thoughts to tomorrow's itinerary.



Top to bottom: Marsh Harrier; Reed Bunting; Starlings.

Day Four: 19th January. Exe estuary cruise, Stover Country Park.

Today we headed east to the Exe estuary, and we arrived in Exmouth in glorious sunshine as we boarded our cruise boat to explore this important bird refuge. 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 towards the river mouth before sailing upriver to Topsham, and we noted a wide range of wildfowl and wader species as we progressed along the channel.

We started off with Cormorants and Shags, the latter looking splendid with their crests and iridescent greenish colouration showing well in the bright sun. There were small groups of Dark-bellied Brent Geese, along with Shelduck, Curlew, Sanderling, Turnstone, Oystercatcher and Great Crested Grebes in winter plumage. Several Greenshank fed on the muddy riverbank, we saw a Grey Seal resting on a pontoon, whilst a little further on we found a Common (Harbour) Seal hauled out on a sandbank, allowing us to compare its slimmer build and more rounded head shape.

As we went further upstream we encountered a broader variety of waders, which included Redshank, Dunlin, Grey Plover, Golden Plover, Lapwing, Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwit, and the unmistakable Avocets. A group of Red-breasted Mergansers flew past the boat, while some Knot were present but only seen by a lucky few. After we reached Topsham the boat turned round and it was time to head back to the dock, but before we arrived in Exmouth we were able to warm ourselves with a delicious pasty and a hot drink as we marvelled at the sheer number of birds and enjoyed the fine views across the estuary.

Back on dry land we joined up with Peter again and drove to Stover Country Park, an area of mixed woodland surrounding a scenic lake which supports a range of wildfowl and woodland bird species. Straight away we saw close-up Tufted Ducks, while further away, gleaming white in the sunshine, were four male Goosander, with two females in close attendance. Along a side channel we spotted some Mandarin Ducks tucked away on the opposite bank, keeping a low profile despite the males' outrageously colourful plumage.

As we walked around the lake we noted Mallard, Mute Swan, Wigeon and Little Grebe, before we turned our attention to the woodland birds at a feeding station on a raised canopy walkway. Although the feeder was empty, there were several Blue, Great and Coal Tits, as well as Chaffinch and Robin to be seen at close quarters. We decided to walk on a little further to another area where food is often put out for the birds, and here we were rewarded with lovely close views of Long-tailed Tit, Marsh Tit and Nuthatch, while Siskins fed in the nearby Alder and birch trees.

Reluctantly we dragged ourselves away from the confiding songbirds and completed our circuit of the lake, stopping to enjoy sightings of Sparrowhawk, Goldcrest, Grey Heron and more Mandarin Ducks. With our bird list for the trip now numbering in excess of 100 species, we returned to Bickley Mill Inn to relax a while before our final evening together, where over dinner we looked back on our favourite moments and wildlife highlights of our time in the West Country.

Mike Symes, Wildlife Travel. January 2023.



Top to bottom: Shag; Harbour Seal; Exe estuary; Marsh Tit; Mandarin Ducks.

Devon 2023: some highlights

H = bird was heard only

	ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	5
BIRDS							
Family Anatidae (Swans, geese and ducks)							
	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</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>			◆		
	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			◆		
	Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>			◆	◆	
	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			◆	◆	
	Pochard	<i>Aythya farina</i>			◆		
	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			◆	◆	
	Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>				◆	
	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				◆	
	Red-Breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				◆	
Family Phasianidae (Pheasants and Partridges)							
	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		◆		◆	
Family Gaviidae (Divers)							
	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		◆			
	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		◆			
	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		◆			
Family Podicipedidae (Grebes)							
	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			◆	◆	
	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</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 (Herons)							
	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			◆	◆	
	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			◆		
	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			◆	◆	
	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			◆	◆	
Family Accipitridae (Hawks and Eagles)							
	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			◆		

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	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			◆	◆	
	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		◆	◆	◆	
Family Falconidae (Falcons)							
	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				◆	
	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</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>				◆	
	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</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>				◆	
	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				◆	
Family Charadriidae (Plovers)							
	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				◆	
	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				◆	
	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			◆	◆	
Family Laridae (Gulls)							
	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		◆		◆	
	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				◆	
	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>		◆			
	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		◆		◆	
	Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>		◆			
Family Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)							
	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		◆		◆	
	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Stock Dove	<i>Columa oenas</i>				H	
	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			◆		
Family Tytonidae (Barn Owls)							

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	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			◆		
Family Strigidae (Owls)							
	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H			
Family Picidae (Woodpeckers)							
	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			H		
	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			◆		
Family Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)							
	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			◆	◆	
Family Motacillidae (Pipits and Wagtails)							
	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		◆			
	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		◆			
	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				H	
	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		◆	◆	◆	
Family Troglodytidae (Wrens)							
	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		◆	◆	◆	
Family Prunellidae (Accentors)							
	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		◆	◆	◆	
Family Muscicapidae (Flycatchers and Chats)							
	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		◆	◆	◆	
Family Turdidae (Thrushes)							
	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			◆	◆	
	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			◆		
	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			◆		
Family Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers)							
	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H		
Family Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)							
	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			◆	◆	
Family Regulidae (Crests)							
	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			◆	◆	
Family Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)							
	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			◆	◆	
Family Paridae (Tits)							
	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecilus palustris</i>				◆	
	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			◆	◆	
	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		◆	◆	◆	
	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		◆	◆	◆	
Family Sittidae (Nuthatches)							
	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				◆	
Family Corvidae (Crows)							
	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		◆	◆	◆	

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	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</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>		◆	◆	◆	
	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		◆			
	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			◆		
	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			◆	◆	
Family Emberizidae (Buntings)							
	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			◆		
	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		◆			

	ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	5
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>			◆	◆	