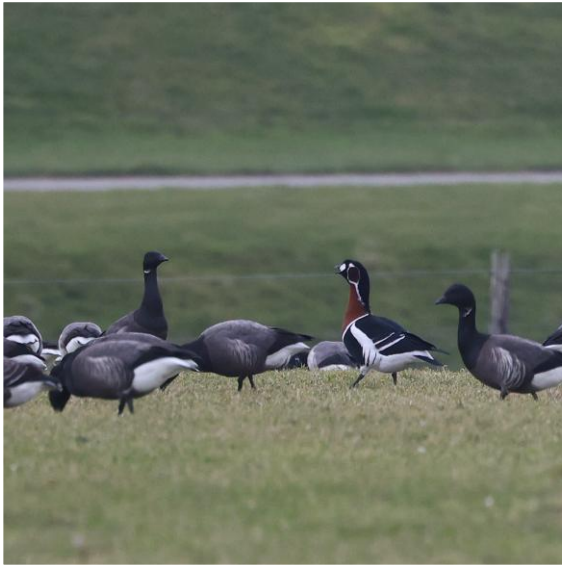


Tour Report Holland's Winter Birding 22 – 26 January 2026

Red-breasted goose & brent geese



Tundra bean goose



Shoerlark



White-tailed eagle



Compiled by Martijn Bot

This year, for the first time, I joined the group for five days of winter birding in the Netherlands. Last Thursday, I picked up the participants from Schiphol, and we set out to visit various locations. The itinerary included the Wadden Sea salt marshes, woodland and raised bogs, Ameland, Lauwersmeer, the Oostvaardersplassen, and the Kop van Noord-Holland, so it was reasonable to expect that we would encounter many fine northern winter species.

Winter can be great and beautiful, but it also has a very different side. The northern provinces have been dealing with wintry conditions for quite some time now. After the huge snowfall a week and a half ago, it never really turned mild again, and for the days ahead an unpleasant type of winter was predicted. Continuous frost, overcast skies, a very biting and strong easterly wind, and regular chances of freezing rain and other forms of slipperiness: not exactly what you want... It was simply extremely cold, almost all water bodies and ditches were frozen over, and especially on the second and third mornings we had to watch out for treacherous icy conditions on the smaller roads. And all of this while in the southern half of the country (figuratively speaking) café terraces were full and it was ten degrees warmer. A small country can still show big contrasts.

In short: we were just plain unlucky with these bizarre and harsh conditions. It was clear that this also meant there were significantly fewer birds around. Sadly, I couldn't show my guests how beautiful winter birding in the north of the Netherlands can be at its best. Because of the unpleasant conditions, we spent less time outside the minibus than we normally would, which of course automatically results in fewer species. A real shame, but fortunately the group was very understanding and took things as they came. And of course it wasn't as if we saw nothing at all: even with less luck, you can still put together a fine list of sightings!

Thursday 22 January 2026

Day 1:

Oostvaardersplassen

Weather-wise, the first day was still excellent. The Oostvaardersplassen are a logical first stop when heading north from Schiphol, and the area did not disappoint. Under steel-blue skies, which, in hindsight, turned out to be the first and immediately also the last hours of sunshine of the entire five-day trip, we encountered the rarest bird of the whole tour at our very first stop: a female Bufflehead. Although it was at quite some distance, it was clearly visible through the scope. We were also able to record species such as Caspian gull, greater scaup, goosander, ruddy duck and many species of common ducks.

Several short stops at viewpoints in and around the area produced much more good stuff: hen harrier and marsh harrier, displaying smew, a great grey shrike, golden plovers, a ruff, great and little egrets, and whooper swans, for example. A special mention is deserved for the now almost guaranteed white-tailed eagles: with eight individuals, together with a few ravens and a red fox, they put on a great show. As we were leaving the area, a stunning red kite suddenly appeared above the road! The English participants regarded this as completely normal and hardly understood my excitement. For them, it's an almost daily sight, but here (the Oostvaardersplassen) and now (mid-winter) this was, from a Dutch perspective, a truly unexpected gift!



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Friday 23 January 2026

Day 2:

Fochteloërveen and Bakkeveen

A 'code orange' warning for freezing rain in the north of the Netherlands meant we took it easy in the morning. Safety first, of course. Road conditions were strange: in one place there was no problem at all, but a bit further on you'd have been better off wearing ice skates.

So we started almost literally around the corner from the hotel, where there is a roost tree with long-eared owls. A few were nicely visible, but for most of the approximately 15 birds you needed the thermal camera. long-eared owls are apparently quite rare in England (or at least where my guests are from), because the enthusiasm was huge!



We then slowly made our way towards the Fochteloërveen. It turned out to be fairly quiet, and even the Cranes—which we almost always see there—were unfortunately nowhere to be found on this very cold day. We did encounter enormous flocks of tundra bean geese, white-fronted geese, barnacle geese and greylag geese. Some careful scanning produced a handful of the scarce (and personally favourite) pink-footed geese. There was also a rather remarkable hybrid white-fronted goose × bean goose sp. in the group. I've seen these hybrids before, but individuals with such a bright orange bill were new to me!

A walk through the forest was very quiet, partly due to the strong and cold wind. Some common passerines (including goldcrests), a woodcock and yellowhammers were nice, and a displaying goshawk flying straight over us, calling and with its characteristic 'slow-motion wingbeats', was beautiful. Unfortunately, my camera's autofocus let me down at that moment, so you'll just have to take my word for it ;-)!

After lunch (we had a proper indoor lunch every day), we tried to add some forest birds in Bakkeveen, but here too it was mostly frustratingly quiet. Luckily, the thermal camera came to the rescue and revealed a resting woodcock. Otherwise, we would certainly have walked straight past it!

Saturday 24 January 2026

Day 3:

Wadden Coast

This day once again started with a code orange weather warning, this time lasting longer and being even more unpleasant than the day before. Once again, we began a bit later than planned, on a day that would normally be packed with salt marsh specialities. However, because of the cutting wind, it was anything but pleasant to be outside, and we were essentially limited to short walks followed by quickly warming up again. The Lauwersmeer (or at least the interesting habitats) was also completely frozen over, which didn't help. These kinds of conditions over such a long period are truly exceptional—just really bad luck...

The first thing you see when entering the area is the enormous flocks of brent geese and barnacle geese. At least they didn't disappoint, although initially we couldn't find anything special among them. Slaloming between different fields did produce smew and several tree sparrows. The latter species is declining sharply, also in England, so it was a sighting that was very much appreciated.

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Wrapped up in every layer of clothing we had available, we eventually did venture onto the salt marsh. It certainly didn't produce the numbers and species that had been normal here in recent months, but we still returned with, among other things, woodcock, common snipe, twite, rock pipits, skylarks and at least three short-eared owls. Two birds flew briefly, while a third was found with the thermal camera, trying to shelter in tall vegetation from the biting easterly wind.



Short-eared Owl in the landscape. Cold fingers and watery eyes are my excuse for this rather meagre result ;-). It looked great through the scope!

The final hour of driving around, including along the eastern side of the Lauwersmeer, produced, among other things, a white-tailed eagle, sparrowhawk, whooper swans, goosanders, goldeneye, tundra bean geese and ravens.

On the way back, we also saw an impressive group of starlings in a farmyard. This was only a small part of the flock, which was probably making a stopover on its way to the roost in the Lauwersmeer area.

Sunday 25 January 2026

Day 4: Ameland

A day that wasn't on the original planning, but one that really belongs in a multi-day trip in the north: a visit to a Wadden Sea island, in this case Ameland. Unfortunately, it was again very cold today, and also misty to foggy. As a result, the island didn't show its actual beauty. Ameland is a place that truly fires the imagination and calls for, among other things, a walk along the "Green Beach", but for reasons of wellbeing that simply wasn't an option today. Such a shame—especially because I know how beautiful and productive it can be here.

So the day consisted, besides the two ferry crossings (Eiders!), mainly of slaloming through the various polders. We did start along the Wadden Sea, where various waders showed well, in large numbers and at close range. Dunlin, golden and grey plovers, curlews, oystercatchers, Icelandic black-tailed godwits and turnstones were foraging over the slowly flooding mudflats around the ferry harbour at Nes.



As usual, the polders were overflowing with geese. Of course, we were mainly searching for Ameland's winter speciality: Red-breasted goose. Nowhere else in Europe, outside the Black Sea coast where they winter in large numbers, is the species as 'reliable' as on this Wadden island. Numbers are always small, of course, but they have been present almost every year for a long time. We found the first birds very quickly, and later in the day we

found a beautiful family group (male, female and juvenile) at close range. Brilliant!

Red-breasted Goose. The 'manes' are typical for the species!



Among the enormous goose flocks, not all of which could be checked properly (partly because it wasn't pleasant to stand still for long), we did at least see an adult black brant. We also encountered fieldfares, ravens, Northern jackdaws and many species of ducks and waders, including a nice group of Icelandic black-tailed godwits at close range. The numerous hares also received plenty of love and attention from the English guests!

On the return trip we sat warmly inside on the boat, not yet knowing that an hour later—fortunately not far from the hotel—we would break down... The minibus suddenly went into alarm mode due to alternator problems. From one moment to the next, I couldn't go anywhere. Time to switch gears (figuratively, unfortunately). With some help from the home front, my guests were quickly picked up and taken to the hotel while I waited for roadside assistance. With the help of an ANWB hero, the bus and I were escorted to the garage. It was clear that alternative transport would have to be arranged for the final day. Fortunately, with the help of a regional rental company, which turned out to be fairly easy, so the inconvenience for the group was limited. Incredibly annoying (and costly!), but these things do happen occasionally when you cover many kilometres and the (usually very reliable) minibus is essentially a mobile workplace. I was 'glad' that it happened here and now, close by, and not the next day on the way to Schiphol...

Monday 26 January 2026

Day 5:

Afsluitdijk and Kop van Noord-Holland

As soon as we left the far north, it immediately became noticeably milder. It still wasn't comfortable, but the wind was much less strong than on previous days, which made a big difference. The Hegewiersterfjild was packed with birds, though mostly common species—but even those can be impressive when present in large numbers! Among the masses of mainly wigeon and shoveler were almost all other common duck species

(including my personal favourites, Pintails), as well as many little grebes, two greater scaup and a Caspian gull. Around Kornwerderzand we saw even more scaup. On the ice edge of the largely frozen Makkumer Noordwaard, wigeon were present in numbers I had never seen before: many, many thousands! Curlews were also present in large numbers, and Bewick's swans and sanderlings could be added to the trip list.

After lunch in the harbour of Den Oever, we still had an hour to explore the polders of Wieringen. An enormous flock of Brent geese took up a large part of that time. As soon as we stepped out, I heard a red-breasted goose calling, but due to the relief in the landscape it took a while before we actually got the bird in view. Shortly afterwards, we completed the trio of Brent geese with an adult black brant and an adult pale-bellied Brent goose. Incidentally, distinguishing these two (sub)species remains quite tricky for the untrained eye, especially when they are moving around in a large flock and aren't always clearly visible. This really is a case of practice makes perfect.



This was the final location of the trip. About an hour later we were standing in front of Schiphol's departure hall, bringing an end to an adventure that had known its fair share of obstacles and limitations. From a birding perspective, things could certainly have been better if the conditions hadn't been so exceptional, but at the same time I look back on an enjoyable trip. The mood was—and remained—excellent, and the group was flexible and understanding. It was clear that wellbeing (read: warmth) was sometimes preferred over the chance of extra species, which was completely logical.

On to next year—and for now, many thanks to my guests for their perseverance and optimism!

Images by Martijn Bot

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Checklist for Holland's Winter Birding



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
	BIRDS						
1	Brent goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>			✓	✓	✓
2	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Red-breasted goose	<i>Branta ruficollis</i>				✓	✓
4	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓			
6	Tundra bean goose	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>		✓	✓	✓	
7	White-fronted goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓		✓		
10	Egyptian goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				✓	
12	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			✓	✓	✓
13	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
14	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			✓	✓	✓
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
17	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
18	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓			✓	✓
19	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
20	Smew	<i>Mergellus albellus</i>	✓		✓		
21	Greater scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	✓				✓
22	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				✓	
23	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			✓		
24	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓		✓		✓
25	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓	✓	

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26	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓	✓	✓
27	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓			✓	✓
28	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					✓
29	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Great white egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓				
32	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	✓		✓		
34	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	✓	
35	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		✓			
36	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓				
37	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓				
38	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓				
39	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	✓				
41	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				✓	✓
44	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓			✓	✓
45	Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓			✓	✓
46	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				✓	
47	Ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	✓
48	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			✓	✓	✓
49	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				✓	
50	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓	✓	✓
51	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	✓				
52	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					✓
53	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓	✓
54	Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>		✓	✓		
55	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓	✓	
56	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				✓	✓
57	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
59	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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60	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓			✓	✓
61	Caspian gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	✓				✓
62	Rock dove / feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓	✓
66	Long-eared owl	<i>Asio otus</i>		✓			
67	Short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			✓		
68	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓			
69	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Great grey shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	✓				
71	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓			
72	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
73	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓		✓	✓	
77	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓			
78	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓		
81	Shore lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>			✓		
82	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓				
83	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓			
84	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓			
85	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓			✓
86	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓				
87	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓	✓			
88	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
89	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓		✓	
91	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓				
92	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
93	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓		

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94	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			✓		
96	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓	
97	Rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓		
98	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓		✓	
99	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓
100	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>			✓		
101	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	✓	✓			
	MAMMALS						
1	Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>			✓		
2	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓				
3	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓		✓		
4	Red deer		✓				
	ADDITIONAL						
1	Bufflehead		✓				
2	Black brant	<i>Branta nigricans</i>				✓	✓
3	Pale-bellied brant	<i>Branta hrota</i>					✓
4	Northern jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula monedula</i>				✓	