

The Telegraph

Birdwatching: Devon's got the Exe factor

Brian Jackman finds avocets and oystercatchers, welcoming inns and wild open spaces on a visit to the south Devon coast.



'Feeding parties of avocets create a black-and-white ballet as they scythe the shallows with up-curved bills' Photo: Alamy

By Brian Jackman

9:17AM GMT 21 Jan 2010

Locked in the bone-clenching midwinter chill, Devon lies silent under a pewter sky. At Dawlish Warren the beach is deserted, but inland the Exe estuary is bursting with life. At this time of year it is hard to imagine the south Devon coast as England's Riviera, but there is no better season in which to discover the secret world of the Exe.

Born in a bog near Simonsbath, the Exe is a contrary river. From its modest beginnings on the roof of Exmoor it is only five miles to the Bristol Channel. Then, perversely, it strikes out in the opposite direction, heading for the English Channel 60 miles away.

At first it flows swiftly, hurrying between steep wooded hillsides, but at Tiverton it develops a middle-aged spread and becomes a gentler river as it meanders down to Exeter. And it is here, just south of the M5 motorway, that the estuary begins.

Six miles long by a mile across at its widest point, it finally meets the sea at Exmouth, the southernmost point of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. From end to end it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and is also a Ramsar site, a global designation putting it in the same league as the Florida Everglades and the Camargue.

[Deals of the day: UK \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/budgettravel/6508947/UK-holidays-deals-of-the-day.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/budgettravel/6508947/UK-holidays-deals-of-the-day.html)

[The best pubs with rooms \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/hotels/ukhotels/6936751/The-best-pubs-with-rooms-the-traditional-warmer.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/hotels/ukhotels/6936751/The-best-pubs-with-rooms-the-traditional-warmer.html)

[Life: the world's most amazing animals \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/picturegalleries/6581422/Life-the-worlds-most-amazing-animals.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/picturegalleries/6581422/Life-the-worlds-most-amazing-animals.html)

[Wildlife watching calendar \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/picturegalleries/6066652/World-wildlife-watching-calendar.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/picturegalleries/6066652/World-wildlife-watching-calendar.html)

Its mudflats and sandbanks are as rich as a rainforest, stuffed full with worms, clams and tiny snails, thick as currants in a Christmas pudding – and this is the Exe factor that makes it a major refuge for wintering wildfowl.

"A cubic metre of estuary mud contains the same calorific value as 14 Mars Bars," says Sally Mills, the local RSPB reserves' warden. "And that's what pulls in the birds."

Until a few months ago she was warden on Aride Island in the Seychelles. Now, despite the difference in temperature, she is equally passionate about the Exe. So much so that she has even commandeered the Topsham Turf Ferry to take me on a half-day winter cruise.

With the tide falling fast we hurry down to Trout's Boatyard in Topsham, where the blue-and-white painted Sea Dream II is moored at the quayside. Steve Garratt, her skipper, is an ex-Royal Navy helicopter pilot who retired to live here five years ago.

That was when he bought Sea Dream II. "She was built on the beach at Teignmouth 80 years ago and is still going strong," he says proudly. As well as ferrying people to the Turf Lock Inn in the main holiday season, he operates winter birding cruises for the RSPB.

Now, with Garratt at the wheel, we go with the flow, pattering downstream into an opalescent morning haze, following the main channel as it hugs the mudflats of Greenland Bank.

In this no-man's land between the tides, everything is a gleam: the shining water; the glittering flats. The mist has completely erased the horizon, making it impossible to tell where sea ends and sky begins, and wherever I look there are birds.

Curlews stalk purposefully along the shoreline. Feeding parties of avocets create a black-and-white ballet as they scythe the shallows with up-curved bills. Flocks of godwits hurtle past on flickering wings. Dunlin – another name for them is sea mice – scurry among stranded clumps of bladder wrack, and chevrons of brent geese fly overhead on their way to graze on Exminster Marshes.

These brents are the dark-bellied race that comes from Arctic Russia, and up to 1,500 of them spend the winter here, Mills says. "We can tell by the numbers of young birds that arrive if it has been a good or bad lemming year in the Arctic. When lemmings are plentiful, the Arctic foxes and other predators have lots to eat and spare the goslings. But a bad lemming year is bad news for the geese, and this winter we haven't seen many juveniles."

Midway down the estuary between Powderham and Lymptstone we turn and head for Turf Lock at the entrance to the Exeter Ship Canal. There is nobody else around. The yachts moored

three abreast in the canal are battened down for winter and the slate-hung Turf Hotel is closed.

I follow the towpath past Exminster Marshes. Gulls scream in the windless air and the estuary is like a mirror, grey and muted under thickening cloud, a monochrome world relieved only by the lion-coloured walls of canal-side reeds. "The estuary is always changing," Mills says. "It's never the same from one hour to the next."

Back in Topsham there is still time to explore before nightfall. I stroll down the Strand, a Millionaire's Row of Dutch-gabled houses overlooking the water. At the far end is the Goat Walk, a path beside the sea wall that eventually turns inland to Bowling Green Marshes, where snipe fly up from ice-rimmed pools.

Next day, revived by a cosy night at the Globe Hotel, I move on to Dawlish Warren at the estuary mouth. The Warren is a giant sandbar stretching towards Exmouth for a mile and a half. On its seaward side runs a line of sand hills bristling with marram grass, and the land behind it is a National Nature Reserve, a wilderness of rabbit-cropped turf with a golf course in the middle.

With my binoculars I can see hundreds of oystercatchers on the sandbar known as Bull Hill. They come every day to feed on the mussel beds, hammering open the shells with their coral-red bills until the tide drives them off.

Come lunchtime and I'm feeling peckish, too. So it's off to the Anchor at Cockwood, a mile up the estuary. "Cock'ood," as the locals call it, would not be the same without its 17th-century harbour-side inn. Originally a seaman's mission, it boasts open fires, beams galore and even a friendly ghost and his dog. But best of all is its seafood menu, offering mussels, fresh daily from the Exe and cooked in 30 different ways.

Afterwards I return to the Warren for a last look at the sea. In summer the dunes are overrun, but in winter this is a lonely spot, shriven by the wind, reclaimed by the wild, and when at last the sun goes down the sky is filled with skeins of duck.

Driving home past Powderham Castle I can see fallow deer grazing under parkland oaks. Their antlered heads stare from the shadows. At Exeter it is almost dark, and out in the estuary the oystercatchers will be feeding again, falling on Bull Hill in shrilling droves until the tide drives them back once more.

Essentials

Where to stay

The Globe Hotel, Fore Street, Topsham (01392 873471; www.globehotel.com) (<http://www.globehotel.com>)

Friendly coaching inn with a restaurant whose local specialities include the Topsham Smokie (smoked haddock with cheese in a pot).

Estuary cruises

RSPB Avocet Cruises (01392 432691; www.rspb.org.uk) (<http://www.rspb.org.uk>)

Guided three to four-hour cruises suitable for all birders, with departures from Exmouth or Starcross on the My Queen (a Dunkirk veteran little ship). Departures on Jan 30 and 31, Feb 14, 15, 27 and 28, early booking essential. Adults £14, children under 14 years, £6. The RSPB's 90-minute cruises from Topsham on Sea Dream II are fully booked this year, but the boat will operate as a ferry between Topsham and Turf Lock during Easter week (and each weekend thereafter), when you may well spot a few lingering avocets, as well as other birds and wildlife (07778 370582; www.topshamtoturferry.co.uk) (<http://www.topshamtoturferry.co.uk>)

Getting around

Trains run down both sides of the estuary. The Avocet Line runs from Exeter to Exmouth via Topsham, Exton and Lympstone, and Exmouth. Brunel's Line runs from Exeter to Dawlish via Starcross. Both lines have excellent bus connections. Round-robin boat and train excursions to Exmouth are available. Trains run every 30 minutes, fully inclusive fare is £7 for adults, £4 for children. Details from Stuart Line Cruises (01395 222144; www.stuartlinecruises.co.uk) (<http://www.stuartlinecruises.co.uk>)

For keen walkers, the Exe Valley Way (www.devon.gov.uk/exevalleyway.pdf) (<http://www.devon.gov.uk/exevalleyway.pdf>) follows the river all the way from Exford to the sea.

Eating out

The Anchor Inn, Cockwood, near Starcross (01626 890203/891203; www.anchorinncockwood.com) (<http://www.anchorinncockwood.com>) Fish and shellfish straight from the Exe.

Broadway House, 35 High Street, Topsham. (01392 873465; www.broadwayhouse.com) (<http://www.broadwayhouse.com>) Probably the best cream teas in Devon.

Sightseeing

Escot, Ottery St Mary (01404 822188; www.escot-devon.co.uk) (<http://www.escot-devon.co.uk>) Georgian stately home and gardens with mazes, birds of prey collection and other attractions. Open daily, 10 am to 5pm. Otterton Mill, near Budleigh Salterton (01395 568521; www.ottertonmill.com) (<http://www.ottertonmill.com>) The aroma of fresh-baked loaves welcomes visitors to this historic working watermill beside the River Otter.

Shopping

Darts Farm (01392 878200; www.dartsfarm.co.uk) (<http://www.dartsfarm.co.uk>) Not so much a farm shop, more a cathedral of retail therapy; just two minutes off the M5 en route to Topsham.

Further information

Visit Devon (01392 665700; www.visitdevon.co.uk) (<http://www.visitdevon.co.uk>)