

NIOC trip to North Norfolk 19th to 22nd October 2016

The winds were favourable and had been consistently from the east for the previous two weeks as we arrived in north Norfolk to see what rarities and vagrants had been “blown in”.

Based in Wells-next-the-sea we shuttled between some of the best birding sites the county has to offer, including;

- Cley NWT
- Titchwell Marsh RSPB
- Holme NOA
- Holme Beach
- Burnham Overy Staithe
- Wells Wood
- Lady Anne’s Drive, Holkham

I had travelled on the Thursday morning, the morning after the rest of the group but still managed to get from the Sperrins to Cley by 10.30am. We took shelter from some heavy rain in a hide at Cley and almost at once a beautiful female Marsh Harrier flew by. Then as the rain intensified she rested on a “Norfolk hill” (a clump of earth) in front of the hide allowing us wonderful, clear, sustained views. We were able to see her features, plumage, legs and feet so clearly. As this was the first time I’d seen one of these stunning birds it was a superb introduction. All I can say is the books didn’t do her justice...

Then we headed further up the road in Cley to East Bank in search of another special bird, Bearded Tit...and we were successful. Hanging in clear view, near the top of reeds at the water’s edge in a pond, were a male and a female Bearded Tit. We had seen them scampering about first and then...like the Marsh Harrier...they very obligingly “posed” for a few minutes to allow us lovely views. Perfect.

We also saw at the East Bank, Cley what turned out to be an Arctic Peregrine hunting, much larger than our own. We then travelled to Titchwell Marsh RSPB and had lovely views of Red-legged Partridge and the bird that Chris Packham calls “the Audrey Hepburn of the bird world”, Avocet. Also at Titchwell, we had very close views of Little Stint and Grey Plover. Thursday evening finished with supper and a pub quiz in the Lifeboat...not our finest performance but good craic nonetheless!

Friday began at 6.30 with Gary, Nigel and I heading over to Lady Anne’s Drive, Holkham. Nigel spotted a ghostly shape and we were very lucky to have close views of a hunting Barn Owl...a lovely start to the day. After another sumptuous breakfast at ‘The Cobblers Guest House’, with Mike a very affable host, we headed over again to Cley and had fleeting views of Beardies, more Marsh Harriers and the odd looking resident that is the Egyptian Goose.

Leaving Cley we travelled over to Holme NOA (Norfolk Ornithologist’s Association) where we spotted Lesser Whitethroat. We were leaving the reserve to follow-up a sighting of Shore Lark on Holme beach when Gerard shouted out “Waxwing!” A fantastic spot as there 15 feet away atop a tree were four, gorgeous Bohemian Waxwing. Having gloried in their wonder we went on down to Holme beach. The weather worsened and a heavy squall came on but...to cut a long story short...Garry found the Shore Lark and finally we were all treated to wonderful views. As I was enjoying my lifer view through my scope another bird walked behind them...a woodlark...two lifers in one view. Perfect.

We lunched at Titchwell Marsh RSPB and spent time there in the afternoon when we once again had lovely views of Avocet, and Grey Plover; along with groups of dark-bellied Brent geese. That evening we ate on board the Albatros, a Dutch ship, berthed in Wells' harbour, now a pub...good savoury and sweet pancakes!

On the Saturday morning first thing we all headed over to Lady Anne's Drive, Holkham and were lucky enough to see two Barn Owls hunting as dawn broke, along with a Red Kite, Grey Partridge and close views of a Muntjac deer. We then headed to Wells Wood and were rewarded with a view of a Jack Snipe. Then Garry had a call that a Pallas Warbler had been sighted at Burnham Overy Staithe so off we went. But when we got there we found that the Pallas Warbler had been superseded by a mega twitch for an Isabelline Wheatear, with birders arriving from all over the country.

With time tight before the rest of the group had to leave to head to the airport we began the route march out to the sighting point in the bushes behind the sand dunes. We got there and were rewarded by extremely close views of the Isabelline Wheatear; which very helpfully was along with a Northern Wheatear to show us the differences...a real help for me being less experienced than the others. By this time more and more birders had arrived with some heated altercations with some locals walking their dogs! Unfortunately the rest of the NIOC group had to leave without seeing the Pallas. With another night to stay I had no time pressure and was lucky enough to see the Pallas a few times over the next couple of hours and with the typical generosity of birders everywhere I was able to view it through the scope of the couple standing beside me. A lovely bird...but I preferred the Isabelline...what a morning!!!

I then wandered along to Holkham beach to see the 40 foot Fin whale that had been washed up a couple of days before. A forlorn sight...and a little "ripe" close up! I spent the remainder of the afternoon birding near Wells including a very pleasant hour watching the dark-bellied Brent Geese feeding near Wells harbour from the deck of the Albatros with a glass of local ale in hand. Then a wonderful seafood meal in the Wells Crab House and back to the B&B to listen to Ulster scrape a win over Exeter! Not a bad day!!!

So, with the remainder of the group having returned to Norn Iron, I had Sunday on my own which I spent at Lakenheath Fen RSPB which was on my route back to Stansted. In the last few years the RSPB has turned these former carrot fields into wonderful wetland habitat; famous for Bittern and Marsh Harrier.

It was a lovely sunny day and I was extremely lucky early on to get a distant view of a Bittern flying, but the star of my time there was the Marsh Harrier. I went to a viewpoint in the reserve overlooking a huge expanse of reeds and settled down to wait. Within minutes I was rewarded by two female Marsh Harriers quartering the reed beds. They proceeded to do this, on and off for the next two hours...simply amazing. Then, when I thought it couldn't get any better, a stunning male Marsh Harrier appeared, his closeness and the bright sun showing his tricoloured wings clearly. He proceeded to fly around me for 20 minutes before catching a small bird and flapping off. Perfect.

All in all we saw 104 species of birds between us; listed below; along with a few mammals too, including three species of deer; Roe, Fallow and Muntjac; as well as brown hare, rabbit and stoat or weasel.

Finally, thanks to Carol, Ray, Martin, Nigel, Gerard and Garry for their craic and especially to Garry for organising such a wonderful tour. For me, with 15 lifetime ticks it was another great long weekend away with the NIOC.

Shane P. McGarvey

Bird List

Little Grebe	Pied Avocet	Bohemian Waxwing
Great-crested Grebe	Northern Lapwing	Dunnock
Northern Gannet	European Golden-Plover	European Robin
Great Cormorant	Grey Plover	Northern Wheatear
Grey Heron	Common Ringed Plover	Isabelline Wheatear
Little Egret	Ruddy Turnstone	European Stonechat
Great Egret	Black-tailed Godwit	Song Thrush
Great Bittern	Eurasian Curlew	Redwing
Pink-footed Goose	Common Redshank	Mistle Thrush
Greylag Goose	Common Greenshank (H)	Fieldfare
Greater Canada Goose	Common Snipe	Common Blackbird
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	Jack Snipe	Cetti's Warbler (H)
Mute Swan	Red Knot	Pallas's Leaf-Warbler
Common Shelduck	Sanderling	Lesser Whitethroat (Eastern)
Egyptian Goose	Little Stint	Goldcrest
Eurasian Wigeon	Dunlin	Eurasian Blue Tit
Gadwall	Ruff	Long-tailed Tit
Common Teal	Common Gull	Bearded Tit
Mallard	European Herring Gull	Eurasian Magpie
Northern Shoveler	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Eurasian Jay
Tufted Duck	Great Black-backed Gull	Eurasian Jackdaw
Red-breasted Merganser	Black-headed Gull	Rook
Red Kite	Razorbill	Carrion Crow
Western Marsh-Harrier	Feral Pigeon	Eurasian Starling
Hen Harrier	Common Wood-pigeon	Chaffinch
Northern Sparrowhawk	Eurasian Collared-Dove	Eurasian Linnet
Common Buzzard	Barn Owl	Twite
Common Kestrel	Tawny Owl (H)	European Goldfinch
Peregrine Falcon	Common Kingfisher	European Greenfinch
Red-legged Partridge	Skylark	Eurasian Siskin
Grey Partridge	Wood Lark	Common Crossbill
Common Pheasant	Shore Lark	House Sparrow
Water Rail	Pied Wagtail	Reed Bunting
Common Moorhen	Grey Wagtail	Lapland Bunting
Common Coot	Meadow Pipit	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Winter Wren	