

## Tour Report Norfolk in Early Summer 3 – 7 June 2024

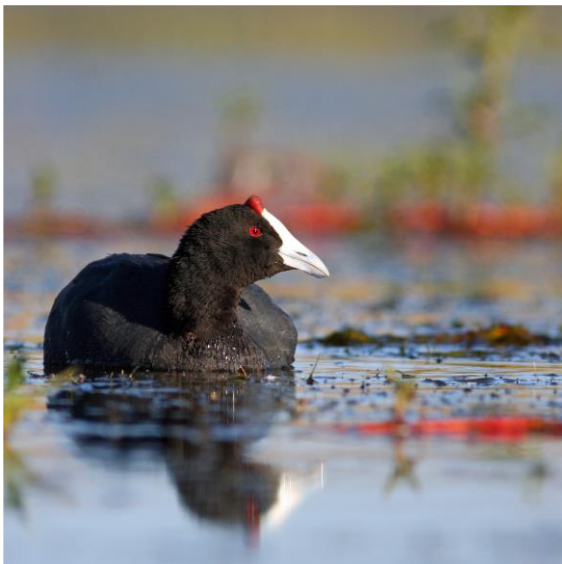
Woodlark



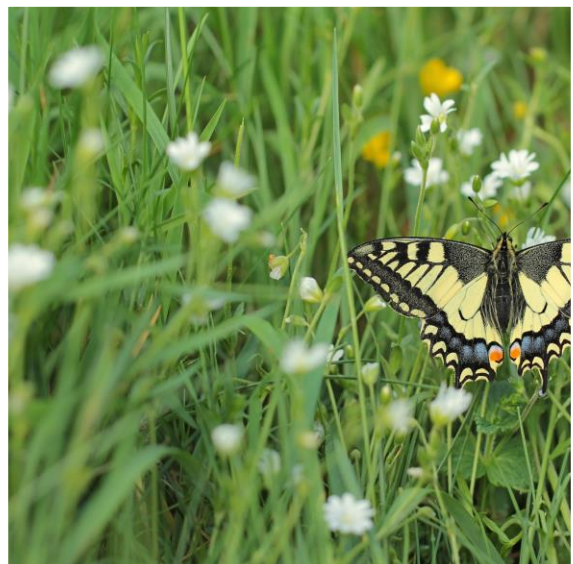
Osprey



Gadwall



Swallowtail



Compiled by Nick Acheson

Norfolk is among the finest UK counties for wildlife, thanks to its location and great range of habitats. Our tour focused on three of the most biodiverse regions of Norfolk: the Brecks, the Broads and the North Norfolk Coast. Despite some unfavourable weather, we saw a tremendous range of the county's best-loved species, including bittern, marsh harrier, stone curlew, common crane, Norfolk hawk, swallowtail, Dartford warbler and fen orchid.

### **Day 1:**

**Monday 3 June 2024**

Snettisham Coastal Park

*Weather: Clear and bright*

Having settled into our comfortable hotel, we headed out to Snettisham Coastal Park, which is well known for its breeding turtle doves. This gorgeous bird has sadly become extremely rare in the UK, so it was gratifying to see and hear a handful of them. Also here were singing sedge and reed warblers, blackcaps and lesser whitethroats and – on the marshy side of the sea wall – plenty of singing reed buntings. The marsh was home to lapwings, avocets, redshank, shelduck, shoveler and a pair of marsh harriers which delighted us by performing a food pass almost above our heads.

In the evening, we visited a wonderful heath near our hotel. Our chief target here was the strange nightjar. Most unusually for this site, despite hearing a couple of singing males, we had only distant views of birds in flight. The same could not be said for the woodcock, which displayed above us, often in two's and three's, almost the whole time we were there. Nor for a tree pipit, carrying food, which landed in a small pine by the boardwalk. Noctule bats put in an excellent performance too. As did the midges which feed many of the nocturnal vertebrates of this exceptional heath.

### **Day 2:**

**Tuesday 4 June 2024**

*Weather: Cloudy with periods of heavy rain*

We spent our first full day in the Norfolk Brecks, calling first at Lynford Arboretum, which supports a range of woodland birds. There were siskins calling overhead constantly and several singing goldcrests. One of our targets – the subtly lovely spotted flycatcher – was harder work, appearing just once, rather briefly, and then disappearing into the woods.

From Lynford we moved to NWT Weeting Heath where we were treated to excellent views of two stone curlews and several lapwings. Common curlews called at the back of the heath and occasionally flew by. In the car park, we admired the reintroduced Breckland wormwood and the leaves and flower shoots (but not quite flowers) of broad-leaved helleborines.

By the time we crossed the Little Ouse and the county boundary with Suffolk, to visit the RSPB's superb Lakenheath Fen reserve, the weather was getting significantly worse, with the wind growing stronger and grey clouds gathering. Nonetheless we strode out onto the reserve (after lunch, not to mention the coffees and local ice creams which many of you enjoyed). We were greeted very quickly by a cuckoo, which perched in a poplar by the railway, affording us excellent views in the scopes. At the first fen there were little grebes, coots, tufted ducks and – in the distance – swooping hobbies. As we walked the length of the fen, towards the next poplar plantation, it became clear what the hobbies were swooping for: in the shelter of the trees there were plenty of Odonata, including common blue damselflies, hairy dragonflies, four-spotted chasers, and a single male scarce chaser.

By the time we reached Joist Fen, however, the weather was against us. The wind was blowing strongly and heavy rain began to fall. We heard a bittern boom once or twice and watched marsh harriers battling the wind, but, after valiantly staying for several minutes, we decided to head back to the vehicles and our warm hotel.

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**Day 3:****Wednesday 5 June 2024***Weather: Mostly clear*

We spent today in the North Norfolk Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and saw many species of outstanding natural beauty to boot. We had heard that Norfolk's breeding bee-eaters had returned to the site where they bred in 2022 and attempted to breed in 2023. With this in mind, we drove to the east of Cromer. Not long after our arrival, as we admired common spotted orchids in the grass beside the path, the first of the pair of bee-eaters appeared. While we never saw these stunning birds at close range, we were thrilled to see them perched on electricity wires above the sand quarry where they were excavating this year's nest.

Buoyed by our success with these charismatic birds, we began our journey west, stopping at Kelling Heath in the hope of seeing Dartford warblers. As we walked to the Dartford warbler territories, we admired heath bedstraw, heath milkwort and red fescue in flower and listened to a singing willow warbler. At one of the best Dartford warbler territories, some of us quickly had views of a male but the bird vanished before most of the group could see it. This happened repeatedly, though a singing woodlark above us was far more obliging. After plenty of glimpses, we decided our Dartford warbler luck had been spent and opted to head on to NWT Cley Marshes for lunch.

We were wrong, however, as our Dartford warbler fortunes were about to turn. We had discussed several times the phenomenon of Dartford warblers very reliably being seen in the company of stonechats, so we were thrilled to bump into a family of stonechats close to the track as we walked back to the car park. True to form, there were two Dartford warblers with them and, this time, everyone had good views of these lovely birds.

We had lunch in the visitor centre at NWT Cley Marshes and spent a very enjoyable hour in Daukes' Hide, watching avocets with plentiful chicks, little ringed plovers, marsh harriers, redshanks, shelducks, gadwall and a sleeping juvenile spoonbill.

Our final stop today was at Morston where we caught a seal trip to the western tip of Blakeney Point. There were plenty of little terns over Blakeney Harbour and a few Sandwich terns. In the shallows off the end of the Point, we were delighted to see several grey seals, watching them dozing in the water and fishing in the incoming tide. However, our enjoyment was dimmed by harrowing sight of a Reeves' muntjac which had foolishly made its way onto the remote sands off Stiffkey and was drowned by the tide.

**Day 4:****Thursday 6 June 2024***Weather: Cloudy with occasional spells of sunshine*

Our final full day was spent in the Norfolk Broads, where our first port of call was NWT Hickling Broad, which was nothing less than superb. On Brendan's Marsh there were plenty of ducks, including gadwall, shoveler, teal and a handsome drake garganey. From the 100 Acre Marsh we could hear a booming bittern, while overhead we saw two common cranes and a hobby. Miraculously – though the forecast was really not good – as soon as we reached Whiteslea Lodge, the sun came out and we immediately saw our first swallowtail, feeding right beside the path on a patch of flowering bramble. A few metres further along the path, as we admired our second pristine swallowtail, a bittern burst from the reed and flew towards us.

We saw at least three more swallowtails along the edge of the Broad, in addition to common terns, marsh harriers, variable damselflies and plenty of singing reed buntings. On our way back to the visitor centre we were amazed by the sheer number of mute swans on the Broad and enjoyed good views of great crested grebes here too.

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After stopping to buy lunch in Wroxham we went on to NWT Ranworth Broad. The boardwalk here is a botanical delight and among the plants we enjoyed here were southern marsh orchid, alder buckthorn, common valerian, milk parsley (food plant of the swallowtail caterpillar), skullcap, orange balsam and a spectacular royal fern. From the visitor centre we quickly found the female of the pair of ospreys which has taken up summer residence at Ranworth. It is hoped that next summer – the fourth year during which ospreys will have spent long periods here – they will raise chicks on the nest which they have built (and which has been rebuilt and shored up for them by the Roy Dennis Foundation).

Our final visit was to NWT Upton Broad, a glorious fen very close to Ranworth, where we peered among thousands of shoots of marsh fern to find marsh lousewort and – exceptionally rare – three fen orchids. Despite their tiny size and pale greenish flowers, you were very generous and indulgent as we raved about how wonderful and how threatened they are.

This evening, after dinner, we called at another heath very close to our hotel, where we saw a singing nightjar and heard a displaying woodcock.

#### **Day 5:**

**Friday 7 June 2024**

*Weather: Bright*

This morning, after breakfast, we took a lovely walk across NWT Roydon Common and NWT Grimston Warren, both of which are close to our hotel. Here we saw an emperor dragonfly and a female keeled skimmer, plentiful stonechats and yellowhammers, a wonderfully obliging woodlark and a common curlew singing over the mire. We also admired NWT's herds of British white cattle and Dartmoor ponies and watched a courting pair of roe deer – in glowing spring pelage – at very close quarters.

By midday we returned to our hotel, where a superb week of Norfolk wildlife came to its end. Come back soon to visit!

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