

Tour Report UK – Autumn in Northumberland 23 – 27 October 2023

Short-eared owl



Common (mealy) redpoll



Common eider



Goldcrest



Compiled by Martin Kitching

A windy and occasionally wet week on the Northumberland coast in the aftermath of Storm Babet, with southeasterly winds bringing a notable arrival of thrush and goldcrest.

Day 1:

Monday 23 October 2023

Budle Bay, Harper's Heugh, and Fenham le Moor

Weather: overcast, 20mph SE, 11°C

Our leader arrived at the Bamburgh Castle Inn to discover that the guests had helpfully already found each other and were gathered ready for the afternoon excursion.

Heading north along the coast we passed the impressive bulk of Bamburgh Castle before our first stop; in the layby overlooking Budle Bay, a large square tidal inlet. Common redshank, curlew, oystercatcher and grey plover were exploring the mud close to us, as more curlew arrived with their eerie cries echoing around the bay. At low tide the Waren Burn is a narrow strip of water snaking across the bay, and arranged along it were black-headed, common, herring, lesser black-backed and great black-backed gulls, wigeon, teal, mallard, shoveler and shelduck then, as the burn widened toward the sea, mute swan, common eider, red-breasted merganser, and a cormorant drying its wings in a heraldic pose. Small flocks of dunlin arrived to probe the mud close to the layby, and a ruddy turnstone flew in, as common redshanks engaged in what seemed like futile squabbles over feeding spots – so much available mud but they seemed to constantly want a spot that's already occupied! The turnstone had no such competition though, as it vanished into a large pile of vegetation and began digging around. A distant flock of barnacle geese included a leucistic bird, and the air was suddenly filled with geese as more arrived from nearby fields, including smaller numbers of pink-footed geese giving themselves away with their high-pitched yapping calls.

Waves of panic rippled through the waders and wildfowl as a peregrine raced effortlessly around the perimeter of the bay, and once everything had settled again, a scan with the 'scope revealed two black-tailed godwits roosting with wigeon.

From Harper's Heugh, overlooking the fields north of Budle Bay, at least nine brown hares were in a field filled with northern lapwings before we headed on to Fenham le Moor – a single-track road that leads down to the foreshore opposite Holy Island. A covey of 15 grey partridge were poking their heads above the crops in one field, while the next held three roe deer as a kestrel flew along the opposite side of the road and a hare crossed the road ahead of us before we turned back and headed to the hotel ready for dinner.

Day 2:

Tuesday 24 October 2023

Holy Island, Fenham le Moor, and Monk's House Pool

Weather: overcast, early drizzle, 20mph SE, 11°C

Gathering after breakfast, a flock of long-tailed tits were busying themselves in the trees next to the minibus as we set off towards Holy Island, the jewel in the crown of the Northumberland coast. Our crossing of the causeway had been timed so that we were across on to the island as the rising tide was encroaching and about to cut it off from the mainland. A dense flock of golden plover were swirling like a starling murmuration before settling on the mud, and as we walked along the main road to the village, the trees were alive with the calls of blackbird and robin. We headed to the Vicar's Garden at the southeast corner of the island where an almost constant flow of migrating redwings, with smaller numbers of fieldfare, passed over Hobthrush (St Cuthbert's Isle) where knot, dunlin, common redshank, bar-tailed godwit and oystercatcher were roosting. Little grebe, common Scoter and red-throated diver were in the water around the isle, and grey seals occasionally popped their heads up as pale-bellied Brent geese flew distantly south. Lesser redpoll and greenfinch were both unusual birds for the island, and a chiffchaff showed briefly in St Mary's churchyard.

From the top of the Heugh, an exposed dyke of Whinstone on the south side of the island, the view over the priory and the village revealed a movement of blackbird and redwing everywhere we looked before we headed back into the village and lunch at the Post Office café.

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A post-lunch walk along the Crooked Lonnen produced dark-bellied Brent geese, curlew, flocks of golden plover, kestrel over the dunes to the north, and a juvenile northern gannet flying over the island as we headed to the Lough, a freshwater pool on the eastern side of the island, originally dug by monks as a fish farm. Mallard, teal, wigeon, goldeneye, moorhen, greater scaup, and a family of mute swans were on the water, and the rushes, reeds and sycamores in front of the hide were a hive of activity with chiffchaff, reed bunting and some very obliging goldcrests watched at close range. We were alerted to the presence of two common redpolls in the rank vegetation behind the hide by a couple of birdwatchers who popped into the hide to let us know about them, and after extraordinary views of these stunning birds, they flew in the Sycamores and were joined by two more meales and a couple of siskin.

We crossed the causeway back to the mainland and headed a couple of miles down the A1 before taking the minor road to the hide at Fenham le Moor. A good sized flock of lesser redpoll, along with a small number of yellowhammers, were moving through the roadside vegetation ahead of us, red-legged partridges were exploring the conservation headland opposite a field with three very close roe deer and at the end of the road the recently uncovered mud was covered with pale-bellied brent geese, wigeon, teal, mallard, shelduck, dunlin, knot and grey plover. The deep rolling calls of the geese intensified into a panic as everything took flight, and a minute later the cause of the consternation was revealed as a peregrine flew across the mudflats, pursued by a small group of corvids. The falcon wasn't going to be deterred from its purpose by the birds following close to its tail, and it took a dunlin off the ground before flying straight towards us, still clutching its prize. The discussion about whether goldcrest or mealy redpoll was bird of the day faded into insignificance...

Any journey back into Seahouses from the north should include a stop at Monk's House Pool, and our day in the field was rounded off with a barn owl quartering the marshy rushy grassland just north of the pool before we returned to the hotel.

Day 3:

Wednesday 25 October 2023

South-East Northumberland

Weather: overcast, persistent heavy drizzle, 20mph NE, 11°C

After breakfast we headed south down the A1 towards Morpeth with our first port of call, in misty drizzle, being Coneygarth just to the west of Ashington. Little and great crested grebes, gadwall, tufted duck, goldeneye, mallard, wigeon and teal were all diving or dabbling as lapwings flew across the pond before squabbling over roost spots. A few miles down the road, the River Blyth flows through Attlee Park in Bedlington (home of the Terriers), and the water level was still quite high following a lot of rain recently. A mixed flock of blue and coal tits had a nuthatch along for company.

The reserve at Northumberlandia produced a range of passerines around the feeding station and in the scrubby undergrowth. House and tree sparrows, blue, great and coal tits, dunnock, robin, wren, chaffinch and brambling were all in close proximity, with a large flock of brambling high in the trees towering over us.

Our lunch stop was at the excellent Drift Café, after which we headed the short distance north to Cresswell Pond. Dunlin, knot, lapwing, redshank, and oystercatcher were all pottering around the muddy margins as a female/immature common scoter drifted across the pond, and great crested grebe were diving when a common snipe flew in and settled in a clump of grass. Obliging, it kept its head up, and everyone was able to enjoy views of it through the 'scope. A ripple of panic in the flock of wigeon gathered on the pond revealed the presence of a marsh harrier, and we watched as it made its way along a hedge line before vanishing in the mist. In a clump of Willow next to the car, goldcrests and a chiffchaff had possibly just arrived in the misty drizzle and stiff north-easterly breeze.

The drive from Cresswell Pond to Druridge Pools produced what was probably the bird of the day; a short-eared owl sitting on a gate post next to the road before flying and settling on a fence post at the edge of Druridge Links. The rushy marsh on the reserve had a family of whooper swans, alongside a lone adult whooper that didn't take flight with them, a female/immature long-tailed duck that was diving in water so

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shallow that you could track its movements by the ripples it was creating, a cormorant that was doing similar but with so much effort that it was causing a wave to surge ahead of it, and a selection of ducks including teal, wigeon and shoveler.

A common buzzard was an unexpected find in heavy rain as we drove past Widdrington Moor Lake, and our final stop for the day was Newbiggin by the Sea, where the Maritime Centre provided the ideal shelter from the north-easterly wind as a selection of waders explored the shoreline along the incoming tide: common ringed plover, grey plover, dunlin, common redshank, bar-tailed godwit, oystercatcher, ruddy turnstone and sanderling were all gathered in one small area between the sea and a mixed group of black-headed and Mediterranean gulls as the sky darkened and heavy rain, that accompanied us for the entire journey back to Seahouses, began to fall.

Day 4:

Thursday 26 October 2023

Howick, Amble, West Chevington, and East Chevington

With a forecast that didn't look good for the afternoon we headed south to spend the morning exploring along the clifftop at Howick. Countless redwings and blackbirds flew from roadside trees along our route, and when we arrived at the car park near Earl Grey's Bathing House there was a fresh breeze and patches of blue sky. Pale-bellied Brent geese, red-breasted mergansers, wigeon, and northern gannets were all heading north with the stiff southeasterly breeze on their backs as common eider bobbed about in the swell. Robins and blackbirds flew across the path ahead of us, while on the rocks below oystercatchers made themselves heard over the roar of the waves pounding the shore, ruddy turnstones were just above the breaking surf and a purple sandpiper revealed itself each time it flew, only to blend in perfectly with the rocks each time it settled. Shockingly blue against the backdrop of foaming water, a kingfisher flew between rocks a few times but only paused briefly where we could see it as a merlin raced by.

After our lunch stop at Lilly's Landing in Amble, we watched male, female and juvenile common eiders at close range in the heavy rain that arrived exactly as forecast. West Chevington produced a ringtail hen harrier braving the wind and rain as it quartered field edges, Widdrington Moor Lake held pochard, tufted duck, goldeneye and little grebe, and the access road to East Chevington had a flock of 30-40 fieldfare and a marsh harrier before we headed back to the warmth of the hotel.

Day 5:

Friday 27 October 2023

Stag Rock and Boulmer

Weather: overcast, 20mph SE, 9°C

After breakfast, some guests with a long drive ahead of them headed off, and once everyone had checked out of the hotel we drove the short distance north to Stag Rock, close to the entrance to Bamburgh Golf Club. Passing Monk's House pool on the way, a flock of 20 skylarks flew overhead. A foamy white and lumpy sea was the perfect backdrop for a juvenile peregrine that was almost stationary in the stiff southeasterly breeze, at eye level over the breaking surf. It vanished behind the lighthouse, before reappearing way offshore chasing auks, then was back in front of us, chasing a Sandwich tern and harassing a razorbill in the surf, where Slavonian grebes were rising and falling on the swell. Northern gannets and a red-throated diver were heading north as a little gull vanished and reappeared, dip-feeding in the troughs between wave crests, and a whimbrel headed south into the breeze above the surf.

Heading down the coast, our final birding spot was the beach at Boulmer Haven. Curlew, bar-tailed godwit, oystercatcher, sanderling, dunlin and ruddy turnstone were being concentrated into one small area by a combination of the rising tide and a mixture of dog walkers and sea glass collectors. Linnets flew from the rank vegetation next to the beach car park, becoming what proved to be the penultimate addition to the week's bird list. Skeins of pink-footed geese filled the sky away to the north as pale-bellied Brent geese flew north offshore, and the final addition to the trip list was probably the least expected when two barn swallow flew low over the beach and out to sea. Five minutes up the road, the Running Fox in Longhoughton was a welcome coffee and cake stop before dropping guests off at Alnmouth Railway Station.

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Checklist for Autumn in Northumberland



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
	BIRD						
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓				
2	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓			✓
3	Brant (Dark-bellied)	<i>Branta bernicla bernicla</i>		✓			
4	Brant (Atlantic)	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>		✓		✓	✓
5	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	✓				
6	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			✓		
7	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			✓		
9	Common shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓			✓
10	Northern shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓		✓		
11	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>			✓		
12	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				✓	
16	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓	✓	
17	Greater scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		✓			
18	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Common scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		✓	✓		✓
20	Long-tailed duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			✓		
21	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
22	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓		✓	
23	Grey partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>	✓				
24	Ring-necked pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
25	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓			
26	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
27	Horned grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>					✓
28	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓		
29	Rock pigeon (Feral pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Common wood-pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Eurasian collared-dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Eurasian moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
33	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓		
34	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Black-bellied plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
36	European golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓			✓
37	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
38	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			✓		✓
39	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					✓

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40	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Bar-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓	✓		✓
42	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓				
43	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Red knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓	✓		✓
45	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓		✓
46	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
47	Purple sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				✓	
48	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓		
49	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Common murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓			✓
51	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>					✓
52	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Little gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>					✓
54	Mediterranean gull	<i>Ichthyaeus melanocephalus</i>			✓		
55	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
56	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Sandwich tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicencis</i>					✓
60	Red-throated loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		✓		✓	✓
61	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓		✓	✓
62	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	European shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓		✓	✓
64	Gray heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	
65	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓		
66	Eurasian marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			✓	✓	
67	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓	
68	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓		
69	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		✓			
70	Short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			✓		
71	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				✓	
72	Eurasian kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Merlin	<i>Falco columbariüü</i>				✓	
74	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	✓			✓
75	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Western jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓		✓		
80	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
81	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓		
82	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					✓
83	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓		
84	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓		
85	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>					✓
86	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓		
87	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
88	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓		

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90	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓		✓	✓
92	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Eurasian blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓		✓	✓
95	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓		✓	✓
97	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
98	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			✓		
99	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
100	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓		✓	✓
101	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓	✓
102	European rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	✓				
103	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓		
104	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			✓		
105	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓			
106	Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓
107	Common redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		✓			
108	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		✓			
109	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓			
110	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓			
111	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓			
112	Common reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓			
	MAMMAL						
1	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		✓			✓
2	European roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓			
3	Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓				

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