

Tour Report Wild Devon in summer 1 – 4 July 2024

European beaver



Common Dolphin



High brown fritillary



Girl bunting



Compiled by Mike Langman

A summer tour of Devon based in East Devon close to the pebble bed heaths and Otter estuary - the home of England's first wild Beavers. With excursions onto Dartmoor, south Devon coast, Coombeshead rewilding project and a cruise on a fast rib out into Lyme Bay.

Day 1:

Monday 1 July 2024

Bowling Green Marsh & River Otter

Weather: fine mostly overcast but bright

Following an early check-in at the Woodbury Park Hotel the group gathered in the reception ready for the first excursion. With an imminent high tide on the Exe estuary, Bowling Green Marsh was chosen as our first tour destination. Waders and gulls were gathering in flocks on the freshwater RSPB reserve. Over the next 45 minutes more birds arrived, forced off the estuary by the rising tide. Curlew were plentiful, there were over 140 black-tailed godwits most still in full breeding plumage, 150 redshank two greenshank and a fantastic full, black summer plumaged spotted redshank. Other birds included little egret plus over 300 black-headed gulls including some juveniles, and a fly-by Kingfisher. Among the many mallards were singles of shoveler, teal and a small number of Shelduck. A quick visit to the estuary viewing platform was rewarding as a flock of six Mediterranean Gulls flew past, which were relocated at Bowling green on the return walk. A flock of lapwings were noted during a walk to nearby Goose Moor.

After an early dinner, we headed out for an evening visit to the River Otter to look for the beavers. Over the lower Otter Restoration project area were 60 or more screaming swifts and a few house martins. On the river, a kingfisher flew past and a tufted duck with two downy young drifted down stream. After locating the beaver lodge, our watching produced nothing but a bit of water movement, which suggested the beaver had moved upstream. A short walk up stream and almost immediately a beaver was spotted in the undergrowth on the far bank. The following hour was just magical with numerous views of the beavers. The whole group were enthralled to watch them out on the bank, dragging a huge branch of foliage back to the lodge. A couple of kits came out of the lodge to feed on the vegetation. Finally an adult sat on a muddy bank just a few meters away for over 20 minutes chewing on a willow branch. What a way to start a wildlife tour!

Day 2:

Tuesday 2 July 2024

Challacombe farm and Headland Warren am Combeshead reserve.

Weather: bright start then overcast and breezy and bright still late afternoon and evening

The first ramble of the day started close to Headland Warren on Dartmoor walking down to Challacombe Farm. As soon as the vehicle parked, a couple of northern wheatears were found on the short turf. Linnets were already gathering in small family groups, with the males looking smart with their red foreheads and chest. Numerous Meadow pipits and Stonechats were spotted during the walk through the valley. A family of Whinchats were discovered close to the farm. The cool overcast weather meant invertebrates were not active with just butterflies being seen - singles of ringlet and meadow brown. Even the normally insect-active pond at Challacombe Farm was quiet with just one distant damselfly spotted. The birds around the farm were better with spotted flycatcher, nuthatch, willow warbler, plenty of swallows and house martins. During a picnic in the meadow treecreepers were heard in the surrounding trees and a party of long-tailed tits moved through the scrub.

Our next destination was Coombeshead rewilding project north of Okehampton. Greeted by the ecologist Tay a fascinating walk and tour of the site followed. So much work has already taken place; the ponds and wetland areas, some of which created by the beavers, were alive with dragonflies and damselflies, including the locally scarce small red damselfly. At one point the path seemed to be crawling with frog or toadlets and marsh frogs croaked from the nearby wetland areas. Walking back to the barns, purring turtle doves could be heard then seen around the release pen. In total six birds were counted; how fantastic it would be to have turtle back in areas of the south west where the breeding population has long since gone. Following teas and coffee, we took a tour of the captive wildlife breeding site with the vast numbers of breeding pens for water voles, then nesting white storks, black stork, European Lynx, plus polecats and finally the wild cats. A ridiculously cute kitten emerged from the undergrowth in a pen and seemed as fascinated by us as we were by it!

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After a picnic supper on the picnic benches, it was time to head back to the beaver enclosure area with Nick. It was not long before the first adult showed, followed by at least two more, a kit, and what appeared to be a large sub adult. Our return route was blocked by four huge water buffalo, and Nick didn't want to take us through the field so called in the calvary in the form of two buggy/quad bikes that returned us safely to the barns and minibus for our journey back to East Devon.

Day 3:

Wednesday 3 July 2024

Lyme Bay Cruise am. Labrador Bay & Aylesbeare RSPB reserves pm. River Otter and Heath evening.

Weather: Bright, occasional sun

An early start for our 8am cruise on the Devon Sea Safaris rib. Soon after leaving the Teign Estuary we saw our first of ten peregrine falcon sightings, including seven juveniles and three harassing a lone Black-headed Gull! Seabirds along the coast included nesting shags, fulmars and cormorants plus several rock pipits. Two grey seals were found hauled out on rocks. Out around the Ore Stone rock were plenty of Guillemots and several Razorbills. Heading south to Berry Head the first of two/three harbour porpoises surfaced and a little later three common dolphins that paid little interest in the boat. Seabirds located included a small flock of Manx shearwater and one Balearic shearwater, kittiwakes and a small flock of Common Scoter. All too soon the cruise was over and we were back in Teignmouth, and it was time for a coffee before moving on to our next land-based excursion.

Labrador Bay is the RSPB 'cirl bunting' reserve but it holds good numbers of farmland and hedgerow birds and wildlife. Plenty of meadow browns were seen as the sun came out plus several marbled whites. Along the field margins whitethroat and blackcaps were heard and a skylark high above an arable field. After a short wait in one particular area - as many as eight cirl buntings showed well in the hedges and fed on some bare earth. A picnic lunch was spent scanning the sea for a minke whale that had been frequenting that area of the bay.

Next stop Aylesbeare Common RSPB reserve. On this lovely heathland reserve, part of the east devon pebble bed heaths, we hoped to catch up with some heathland specialties. It wasn't long before small heath butterflies were seen followed by stonechat, linnets and the hoped for Dartford warbler - probably five or more of the latter. A large wood ant nest teeming with ants was studied, with its lines of ants busily searching and bringing back provisions for the colony.

We enjoyed an early dinner and headed back out again searching for beavers around the lodge and feeding areas, so successfully watched a couple of nights before. Oddly not a sign of a beaver tonight at all, however three goosanders drifted down stream and a kingfisher put on several fly pasts. Banded demoiselles, a large pike and a grey wagtail kept the group entertained.

A good nightjar site, enroute back to the hotel, was visited briefly with three or more nightjars churring and at least a couple seen.

Day 4:

Thursday 4 July 2024

Aish Tor and River Dart

Weather: Bright but blustery a little light rain earlier

The last morning of the tour included a visit to Aish Tor after collecting picnic lunches in Ashburton. The tiny hillside car park surrounded by bracken and bramble is probably one of the best area to search. It was dull at first and rather cool, so we spread out searching the small tracks through the tall bracken. It wasn't long before a fritillary was found, some careful checking confirmed it was one of Britain's rarest butterflies, the high brown fritillary. As the sun came out, more fritillaries were found but they were becoming very active with few settling making identification tricky. However, one member of the group photographed one small pearl-bordered fritillary. After an hour or so all the settled larger fritillaries that were found proved to be high browns. None of the often-commoner dark green fritillaries were positively seen.

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After a short walk by the River Dart the picnic lunch was eaten beside the river, and a goldcrest, grey wagtail and kingfisher were all seen briefly.

It was time to head back to the Woodbury Park Hotel to conclude the tour followed by drop-offs at Exeter railway station.

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Checklist for Wild Devon in Summer



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
	BIRDS					
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓		
2	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓		✓	
3	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓		✓	
4	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓			
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓		✓	
6	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓			
7	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓			
8	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓		
9	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	
10	Manx shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			✓	
11	Balearic shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>			✓	
12	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓			
13	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓		✓	
14	Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓	
15	European shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			✓	
16	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓		✓	
17	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓		
18	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓			
20	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			✓	
21	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓			
22	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓			
23	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓			
24	Spotted redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	✓			

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25	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓			
26	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓		✓	
27	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓		✓	
28	Mediterranean gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	✓		✓	
29	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓	
30	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	
31	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓		
32	Common guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓	
33	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓	
34	Rock dove / feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓	
35	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓		✓
36	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓		
38	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		✓	✓	
39	Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>			✓	
40	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓		✓	✓
41	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓		
42	Green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓	✓
43	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
44	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓	
45	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	
46	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	
47	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓			
48	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	
49	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓	
50	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓		
51	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓	✓
52	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	
53	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	House martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	
55	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓			
56	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓		✓
57	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	✓	
58	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	

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60	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>			✓	✓
61	Dartford warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			✓	
62	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				✓
63	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓		✓
64	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓		
65	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓		
66	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓		
67	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓		
68	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓		
69	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓		
70	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		✓		
71	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓			✓
72	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		✓		✓
73	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	
74	Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓		
75	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		
76	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓		
77	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓	
78	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓
79	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	
80	Rock pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			✓	
81	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓		✓
82	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓		✓
83	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓		
84	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	
85	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	
86	Lesser redpoll	<i>Acanthis cabaret</i>		✓		
87	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				✓
89	Cirl bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			✓	
90	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				✓
91	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓		
92	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			✓	
	MAMMALS					

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1	Eurasian beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	✓	✓		
2	Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓		
3	Grey squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓		
4	Grey seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			✓	
5	Short-beaked common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			✓	
6	Harbour porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			✓	
7	Noctule bat	<i>Nyctalus noctula</i>			✓	
8	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	✓			
	BUTTERFLIES					
1	Large white	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓	
2	Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	
3	High brown fritillary	<i>Fabriciana adippe</i>				✓
4	Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>			✓	✓
5	Meadow brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓	✓	✓
6	Ringlet	<i>Aphantopus hyperantus</i>		✓	✓	
7	Small heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>			✓	✓
	DRAGONFLIES AND DAMSELFLIES					
1	Banded demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>	✓		✓	✓
2	Emerald damselfly	<i>Lestes sponsa</i>		✓		
3	Small red damselfly	<i>Ceriagrion tenellum</i>		✓		
4	Common blue damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>		✓		
5	Blue-tailed damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>		✓		
6	Southern hawkler	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>			✓	✓
7	Emperor dragonfly	<i>Anax imperator</i>		✓		
8	Broad-Bodied chaser	<i>Libellula depressa</i>		✓		
9	Common darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>		✓		
10	Small pearl-bordered fritillary	<i>Boloria selene</i>				✓
	REPTILES, AMPHIBIANS AND OTHER					
1	Common lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>		✓		
2	Common frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>		✓		

3	Marsh Frog	<i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i>		✓		