

## Tour Report UK – Norfolk in Late Summer 18 – 22 September 2020

Knot flock



Brown shrike



White-tailed eagle



Knot flock



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### **Day 1: Friday 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

At two this afternoon we met at Knights Hill Hotel on the edge of King's Lynn and discussed our plan for the next twenty-four hours, in addition to the extra measures in place for our first tour since 2020 went somewhat off the rails. We decided that this afternoon we would head for Snettisham Pits, both because it is a lovely coastal walk and to familiarise ourselves with the terrain before heading out very early the following morning.

There was plenty to see as we went, beginning with the two classic autumn dragonflies — migrant hawkler and common darter — and a distant juvenile marsh harrier beyond the sea wall. We also admired the flora of the vegetated coastal shingle, including yellow horned poppy, sea campion, mouse-ear hawkweed, carline thistle, viper's bugloss and hound's-tongue. Of course there were plenty of birds too, including clouds of knot swirling ahead of the rising tide, making us even more excited for high tide at dawn the next day. Among the thousands of black-headed gulls flying over the pits we saw many adult Mediterranean gulls and we heard Sandwich terns in the distance over the Wash. There were redshank too, out on the mudflat and numbers of greylag and Canada geese, shelduck and cormorants, in addition to winter ducks — wigeon, teal, shoveler — beginning to gather.

As the shadows lengthened we headed back to the hotel for a delicious supper and rest, ahead of an early start the following morning.

### **Day 2: Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

We met this morning at 0515 and set off for Snettisham again, beginning the walk out to the pits in the dark (and in quite a chill wind from the east), listening to the fizz of a barn owl and watching noctule bats as we went. As soon as there was light, however, it was clear that things would very soon be very exciting. There were already huge clouds of knot and other waders swirling over the incoming tide and a great flock of oystercatchers out on the mudflat. Large numbers of greylags were coming off the mud too, heading inland to feed for the day.

As the water flooded visibly into the creeks across the marsh and more and more mud was covered by the incoming tide, the avian fireworks began. There simply aren't words to describe the extraordinary spectacle of tens of thousands of wading birds — principally knot but also curlew, bar-tailed godwit, oystercatcher, dunlin, grey plover, redshank, turnstone, a few ringed plover and just one black-tailed godwit — swirling in giant flocks above you; to describe the whirr of thousands of wings low over your head as the birds head from the mudflats onto the pits. There were shelduck too, of course, mostly staying out on the flats, cormorants on posts, and great flocks of gulls heading inland, including many more white-winged Mediterranean gulls.

We stood for an hour or more simply amazed by the aerobatics of the knot, by their constant chatter and the loud whirr of their wings. Things were soon to get even more exciting, however, as, even while tens of thousands of knot still circled above us, G393, a first year male white-tailed eagle released by the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation on the Isle of Wight last year, who has been in West Norfolk for several weeks now, appeared over the saltmarsh on the far side of the flats. He was systematically working the marsh, testing the birds which remained there, hoping to spot weakness. We were delighted to see him. (The life story of G393, including his sojourn in West Norfolk, can be found [here](#)). To add to the thrill a young male peregrine sliced through the knot flocks, and we would see him twice more during the morning.

There were linnets in the shrubby seablite and both pied and grey wagtails by the pits. Meadow pipits migrated over, calling, and I once heard the call of a rock pipit. More than anything else though, we stood in awe of the vast tide of life swirling above us, arriving from the far corners of the arctic. And as we walked

back to the vehicle we saw a family of five dark-bellied brent geese, first I've seen back from the Siberian tundra this autumn.

After such a morning, it hardly seemed possible that we could see still rarer birds in the afternoon. However, receiving news that Norfolk's second ever brown shrike was being seen extremely well at Warham Greens, we went to North Point, Wells and began to wander east towards Warham, passing numerous wall brown butterflies and a typically hyperactive hummingbird hawkmoth as we went. As soon as we arrived we encountered the shrike and enjoyed wonderful views of this extremely rare bird as it fed along the sunny, sheltered side of a hawthorn hedge laden with berries. We also saw a young redstart here. As we began to walk back we spotted first a marsh harrier hunting over the pig field behind us and then, far out on the marsh, half a dozen young spoonbills. Back at North Point there were plenty of waders: two greenshank flew off calling and three came back, a green sandpiper flew over shouting, a lovely flock of golden plover dropped in (likewise calling, giving their lovely plaintive mews), three black-tailed godwits flew off to the north, and there were plenty of lapwings dotted around among wigeon, black-headed gulls, teal and a handful of pintail.

As we got back to the bus we saw a covey of grey partridges on one side of a fenceline and several hares on the other, not before stepping carefully over a huge elephant hawkmoth caterpillar as it wandered in search of a place to pupate. All in all, a marvellous day of wildlife.

### **Day 3: Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

We were so amazed by yesterday's high tide roost at Snettisham that this morning, half an hour later, we opted to see it again. This morning's roost was dramatically different but equally remarkable. The light was a complete contrast to yesterday's. To the east the sun was rising almost untroubled by cloud; to the west grey cloud reflected the sun's light back onto the swarms of birds. The birds themselves behaved very differently, staying on the mudflats much later and then — broadly speaking — swirling low over the sea before flying low, with an incredible whoosh, over our heads. There also seemed to be far more oystercatchers, especially after the bulk of those initially visible seemed to have moved onto the pits. We also saw black- and bar-tailed godwits, curlew, redshank, grey and ringed plovers, dunlin and turnstone, and we heard a spotted redshank, but as always it was the knot which thrilled us. A peregrine put in a few appearances and was seen at one point carrying prey, and a marsh harrier drifted over the distant marsh where yesterday's eagle had been. As we walked back we saw a number of juvenile gannets over the Wash and we stopped to admire a willow emerald damselfly resting on a bramble close to the car park.

The official count of birds at Snettisham this morning included these totals:

- 68,000 knot
- 6,185 oystercatcher
- 5,452 dunlin
- 2,100 bar-tailed godwit
- 1,930 grey plover
- 1,710 redshank
- 950 curlew
- 205 ringed plover
- 214 turnstone
- 38 little egret

We reached the hotel for a late breakfast (and again commented how efficient and thoughtful the staff were, in the face of so many restrictions and strains) before taking a break until our next excursion.

This afternoon, preferring a less demanding walk, we visited Wells Wood, where a number of scarce birds had been seen of late. First we headed for the Dell, where a red-breasted flycatcher has been present for a couple of days. I managed to find it, but seeing it involved standing on a small dune between trees, which

defeated us as a group, so we headed into a slightly clearer area where we saw a pied flycatcher. We then headed to where a red-backed shrike had been seen just moments before. Despite searching here, and in a suitable patch of habitat nearby, we couldn't find the shrike, though we did make the adorably fluffy acquaintance of wood small reed. We then went back to the Dell, admiring eyebright and other sandy grassland plants, and having excellent views of a newly-arrived brambling feeding on birch seeds.

News of the shrike came again, so we walked back towards Wells, with hundreds of pink-footed geese flying over our heads, and enjoyed excellent views of the bird. We were especially pleased to compare yesterday's brown shrike with today's red-backed. What a rare privilege!

Having seen these wonderful scarce birds we headed back to the hotel along the coast road, discussing coastal landforms and the wildlife they support.

#### **Day 4: Monday 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020**

We had a thoroughly civilised start this morning, having breakfast at 0630 and leaving a little after seven. We were bound for the RSPB's amazing Titchwell Marsh reserve, which can always be counted on to offer excellent birding. First we walked across the south edge of the reserve, stopping to look over a freshwater wetland surrounded by reeds. Here we saw many good birds, including great and little egrets, little grebe, pochard and tufted duck females (helpfully right next to one another), a couple of male marsh harriers, a shoveler and a pintail.

Walking out along the western sea wall we stopped to see plenty of birds on the freshmarsh. There were avocets, dotted along the front of a large flock of bar-tailed godwits, driven here by today's high tide. Three redshank were close to the sea wall, while in the distance three spoonbills were resting and preening. As we reached the northern edge of the freshmarsh we examined a single juvenile ruff (which nobody felt they would have been able to identify) and a single juvenile dunlin.

There was plenty to see besides birds, including sea beet (whose domestic relatives we had been discussing the previous evening), a couple of singing Roesel's bush-cricket and some lesser marsh grasshoppers. Perhaps most exciting among the invertebrates were several sea aster mining bees, largely feeding on perennial sow-thistle, including a loose nesting colony where each female fussed around her burrow in a sandy ridge. Behind the mining bees, on the tidal marsh, there was a large group of Wash waders, including grey plovers, bar-tailed godwits and oystercatchers.

The sea was preternaturally calm and, although distant, we found a couple of juvenile gannets, a winter plumage great crested grebe and a gorgeous red-throated diver, still in breeding plumage. As we walked back we saw three great egrets fly in to the freshmarsh.

We stopped to buy lunch at Burnham Deepdale and ate it south of Warham where the hedge was heaving with thousands and thousands of ivy bees. Our tummies full we explored Warham Fort, both for its archaeological significance (of great interest to several in the group) and its wildlife, including autumn gentian, fairy flax, dwarf thistle, common knapweed, devil's-bit scabious, salad burnet (which some of you tasted), burnet saxifrage, common rock-rose, meadow and field grasshoppers and a busy colony of ivy bees.

Anywhere we might have stopped along the coast road was overflowing with cars, so we decided to go back to the hotel for a short break and visit Norfolk Wildlife Trust Roydon Common in the early evening. The common looked stunning in the evening light, with British white cattle and Dartmoor ponies grazing, snipe flying off the mire, stonechats balancing on the tops of gorse bushes and three juvenile marsh harriers hoping to find a last meal before heading to roost.

## Day 5: Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020

We decided that the best use of our last morning of the tour would be to get up very early again and explore Norfolk Wildlife Trust Holme Dunes from dawn (only along the coastal path as the reserve would be closed until later). Even had we seen no wildlife at all, this would have been a great decision, as sunrise, over the dunes, the pines and the sea, was absolutely beautiful. We did, however, see plenty of great wildlife, including many hundreds of greylag geese flying off their roost, a couple of families of pink-footed geese flying in to the marsh, a few dark-bellied brent geese on the beach and plenty of oystercatchers and curlews in the surf and saltmarsh.

In the dunes and the pines there were stonechats, a handful of newly arrived goldcrests, flocks of linnets, goldfinches and greenfinches, lots of blue tits and a near constant stream of arriving meadow pipits. On Broadwater there were lots of waterbirds: mainly coot, gadwall and mallard. The tape playing Lapland bunting calls close to the nets at the Norfolk Ornithologists' Association reserve was a touch confusing! The sea buckthorn bushes all through the dunes were laden with orange berries — plenty of food for migrant thrushes later in autumn and in winter — though NWT's group of konik ponies were doing their best to rid the dunes of too much bramble scrub, in order to maintain good habitat for natterjack toads, orchids of the dune slacks, scarce butterflies and plenty of other plants and invertebrates.

Having stopped to admire the site of Seahenge we drifted back to the vehicle along the coastal path and drove to our hotel for breakfast at 0930, after which we said our good byes and thanks for four days of wonderful wildlife-watching shared.

