

Tour Report

UK - Norfolk in Late Summer with Nick Acheson

18 – 22 October 2020

Knot flock



Curlew



Redshank



Knot flock



Compiled by Nick Acheson

Day 1: Sunday 18 October 2020

We met this afternoon at two and whizzed through our introductions and the special precautions we are taking in the light of COVID-19. No sooner had we done this than we were off to the field, heading for Thornham. There is a backstory to my choice of Thornham for our first afternoon. Yesterday a rufous-tailed scrub-robin (known in my youth as a rufous bushchat) was found at Stiffkey, the first accessible bird of its species in the UK in forty years. As a result the North Norfolk coast was heaving with twitchers. Since there were rare birds at other sites all along the coast, it was hard to know where to take you to find parking and to stay safe from the crowds!

At Thornham a Pallas's leaf-warbler was being seen, an exquisite bird and rare but far the least mouthwatering of the rare birds around today. There were lots of people on the seawall, but we managed to see the warbler very nicely by staying away from the mêlée and letting it work through the Suaeda towards us. As we stood on the seawall we listened to curlews and snipe in the surrounding grazing marshes and watched redshank in the saltmarsh creek. There were meadow pipits all around and a juvenile swallow flew low over our heads. A spotted redshank flew past, calling, but we couldn't find it, though we did see a merlin over the saltmarsh in the distance. When the Pallas's leaf-warbler skipped through the Suaeda just in front of us, we admired its delicate beauty and the bright lemon-yellow patch on its rump.

It was clear, however, from the crowd at Thornham, that trying to see any other rare birds this afternoon would be both hopeless and unpleasant. So we decided on visiting a raptor roost very close to our hotel, in the hope that perhaps some harriers would come in. We had a lovely hour standing on the heath, with redwings and redpolls calling almost constantly overhead and meadow pipits apparently everywhere in the heather in front of us. Huge flocks of jackdaws passed over to their roost but, unusually, we saw no harriers or other birds of prey come in to roost. As I scanned I picked up a distant great grey shrike in flight. It perched very briefly, but we only managed rather unsatisfactory views of this handsome bird.

Very pleased with our Pallas's leaf-warbler and our first evening of birding together we returned to Knights Hill for a delicious first dinner.

Day 2: Monday 19 October 2020

This morning we were up considerably before the lark to get to RSPB Snettisham in time for dawn and the first of this month's highest tides. We were especially excited as a record count of 140,000 knot had been recorded on the previous evening's tide. Suffice it to say that our expectations were enormously surpassed by what we witnessed. Each high tide event is different and today the knot streamed in a great line for minutes on end, low over our heads, and into the pit. Exceptionally they filled the bare shingle of the pits so completely that the tops birds were forced over the lip, making them visible from the beach. The display from the knot was so magnificent that it was hard to pay attention to the other birds present, but present they emphatically were. At first light a roost of greylags had left the mudflats and flown inland. Later a roost of pink-footed geese flew off towards Lincolnshire. There were other waders too, of course. Lots of oystercatchers flew off the mud, with smaller numbers of redshank, dunlin and grey plover. A peregrine was constantly present too, slicing through the huge flocks of waders above us. Among passerine migrants there were tons of chaffinches and occasionally we would hear the harsh call of a brambling.

A short-eared owl flew low over our heads (an owl had been high on the list of requests for the tour). In passing it appeared to spook the tens of thousands of knot in the pit and we were treated to the birds swirling over the mouth of the pit, much like waves crashing against the shore. Our next excitement came in the form of a great skua, which had been present at Snettisham for three weeks. It flew over us a number of times and landed in the surf of the extreme tide.

We decided we would walk around the south end of the pit towards the new hide. The hide itself is lovely but was very full, so having had a quick look at the knot swarm on the pit we walked back to the beach. Here

we waited for the tide to turn and for the knot to leave the pit. We positioned ourselves just where we felt that they would fly over our heads and indeed they did, whirring just above us in their thousands. Magnificent!

The news came through that the rufous bushchat had been found again. As Stiffkey was the furthest point east that we planned to visit, and as the bird had already been seen by many hundreds since it had been found on Saturday at first light, we decided to check it out and work our way back along the coast. Reaching Stiffkey we were astonished by the number of cars present, all up the entrance road, and the number of twitchers still present.

We stopped for lunch at the Lookout, at the end of Lady Anne's Drive at Holkham, surrounded by pink-footed geese. We then began to walk west along the south side of the pines. Our ultimate goal was the Stejneger's stonechat which was at the end of the pines and the start of Burnham Overy Dunes, but there was a huge amount to see along the way. We grilled literally hundreds of goldcrests and long-tailed tits, in the hope of finding one of the yellow-browed warblers which were still around. Overhead there were redwings, siskins, chaffinches and crossbills. At the end of the pines we had distant views of the Stejneger's stonechat, plus a surprisingly large group of late swallows, to add to the house martin we had seen over the pines. The resident cattle egrets had flown to the west end to join the cows, so were not in their usual spot for us to see. Walking back, however, we did see a couple of the great egrets which also breed at Holkham. (Listers should note that the art and science of identifying Siberian and Stejneger's stonechats is still in its infancy. Although there are now clearly-defined field characters which expert birders use to separate them, these two forms are still lumped together as eastern stonechat by the British Birds Rarities Committee unless a DNA sample can be collected. Happily warden Andy Bloomfield collected some droppings from this bird, so its identity is likely to be accepted by BBRC.)

At the end of our lovely walk we were whacked! We had walked miles and miles today, always in the company of birds. We made our way back to the hotel and to another excellent dinner, thoroughly satisfied by the huge amount that we had seen today.

Day 3: Tuesday 20 October 2020

We had enjoyed yesterday's wader spectacular so much that today we returned, at a more civilised time since the tide was 45 minutes later. True to form, the knots' behaviour was utterly different from the previous day. Most never landed in the pit. Instead huge numbers of them swirled over our heads and over the Wash for most of the time we were there. Peregrines put in an appearance but the rest of yesterday's predators were absent. The oystercatchers were far more obvious today, gathering right in front of us on the mud as the tide rose and pouring over us into the pit.

Having again been amazed by the sheer spectacle of the birds at RSPB Snettisham, we hopped to its sister reserve Titchwell. As is always the case, it was excellent. The freshwater scrape held hundreds of birds, with large numbers of teal in the shallows very close to us. Further away there were gadwall, shoveler, shelduck, avocets, little egrets and more. Dark-bellied brent geese constantly came and went and, to our surprise, two goldeneye flew out of the reedbed and into the saltmarsh. In the channels of the second scrape, which is reverting to saltmarsh at its own pace, we had excellent views of curlew, redshank, grey plover and dunlin, while a reed bunting fed on the bank right beneath us, on the seeds of annual seablite. We had similarly excellent views of black-tailed godwits on the saltmarsh scrape.

The sea was quiet, though we did manage to see a winter-plumaged guillemot quite close to shore and two very distant great crested grebes. We stopped to buy lunch in Burnham Deepdale and hearing the news that the bushchat was being seen again we thought we would make a last attempt to see it, so we drove back to Stiffkey. Again there were lots of birders present so we followed the contingency plan we had made and ambled along the coastal path towards Wells, enjoying many birds as a result. We stopped to look into the difference between adult and juvenile dark-bellied brent geese and saw plenty of curlew and redshank over

the marsh. Proceedings took a different turn when, scanning for nothing in particular, I found a distant and mobile Stejneger's stonechat. To be sure of its identity we needed better views, and in any case we all wanted better views of this rare bird than we'd had at considerable distance at Holkham the day before. We therefore went a little further, to the whirligig, and walked to the edge of the saltmarsh. There were robins and goldcrests around us (both having arrived in large numbers of late) but the stonechat continued only to hop in and out of view. I alerted my friend Mark Golley who appeared with his partner to help track down the bird and document it. He had quick views as he arrived but it was not until after we had left that he found it properly and managed to take some photos which confirmed it was Stejneger's (though see above for the BBRC position).

Our last port of call was Holme Dunes Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve where an unprecedented four red-flanked bluetails had been seen over the weekend. We walked from the village car park along the edge of the golf course to where one had been most recently seen. Instead of a bluetail we saw a barred warbler here, which, after a few moments, gave everyone excellent views. Walking back we came across a group of birders crouched in the path and, looking beyond them, we could see they were watching a red-flanked bluetail. We only managed distant looks at the bird, in order to respect social distancing, but it was yet another very rare bird seen on a remarkable tour.

Day 4: Wednesday 21 October 2020

We had known from the forecast that today would be a wash-out, and it was. As there was no point visiting reserves in the heavy rain, we decided to explore Norfolk's fascinating history, beginning with a visit to the Hanseatic port of King's Lynn. In between rain showers we dipped in and out of old buildings, including a private tour by an artist of his house.

From Lynn we travelled east to Little Snoring, to see its strange Saxon church, though heavy rain kept some wisely in the vehicle. We nipped to Pensthorpe next, both for a hearty and delicious lunch and to visit the exhibition room and coo over harvest mice in a display tank, and corncrakes, bearded tits, ruff, avocets, black-winged stilts, shoveler and turtle doves, all of which are visible from here in the wader aviary. The corncrakes here are retired birds from the collaborative breeding programme which has been reintroducing them to the wild across East Anglia over the past decade.

Having enjoyed our brief visit to Pensthorpe enormously, we drove on to Castlecre. First we scaled the Norman castle, as the rain finally began to ease, before heading to its Cluniac priory, both of which were impressive and powerful. As the rain began to fall again we headed back to the vehicle and home, to dry off and enjoy our final dinner together.

Day 5: Thursday 22 October 2020

On our second morning at Snettisham we met my friend Emma Buck of Norfolk Ornithologists' Association and she kindly offered to show us her ringing site at Hempton Marsh this morning. From a safe distance, we had the privilege of watching blue tits, great tits, chaffinches and goldfinches ringed and learning about the process involved. Time sped by as we watched and we soon had to head back to our hotel to ensure we were all checked out on time.

Thank you all for an excellent trip, particularly for your great energy, enthusiasm and humour; not to mention your flexibility on the day when we were rained off. It was a great pleasure to share Norfolk's, birds, history and wild places with you, and to gasp in awe at the spectacle of our knot by your side. Come back and see us soon.