

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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Dorset's Coasts & Heathlands 17 – 20 October 2016

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Bob Ford

Monday 17 October

The group arrived at our hotel on Portland.

Tuesday 18 October

Weather: mainly sunny especially in the afternoon but in a fresh north-westerly wind.

Portland Bill, 0900

We started our birding break with a sea watch at the Bill with a good range of seabirds seen including gannet, razorbill and shag. All around us there were dozens of rock pipits with small flocks of pied wagtails constantly moving south overhead. Walking along the Eastcliffs towards the Bird Observatory we found a group of four turnstones feeding in their usual manner but amongst the stones at the top of the cliff rather than conventionally on the beach. An attendant rock pipit took advantage of the stone-turning by jumping in and pinching items of food from under the birds' bills!

Reaching the Bird Observatory we had a quick look at the Crown Estate Field opposite and almost immediately found the bird of the day - a gorgeous ringtail hen harrier hunting over the ancient strip lynchets. A buzzard and a couple of stonechats were also seen here before we moved on to the Observatory Quarry to look for the resident little owl. With the fresh north-westerly wind blowing right into the quarry the owl not surprisingly kept well-hidden but we did see the only blackcap of the day.

Suckthumb Quarry, 1100

At first this migrant hot-spot seemed very quiet apart from a circling kestrel, so we tried something different. Instead of chasing around trying to find where the birds were, we found their food and waited. Positioning ourselves with a good view of a bank of cotoneaster berries we soon had good views of a young female ring ouzel. A group of sycamores behind what used to be Weston Craft Centre held lots of birds with some great views of several chiffchaffs and a couple of long-tailed tits.

Wareham, 1130

The old railway cutting just before Easton station has excellent habitat for migrant warblers with a good mix of ash and sycamore. Today not much was present apart from a single chiffchaff and an invisible but noisy yellow-browed warbler.

Ferrybridge, 1300

On arriving at our lunch-stop it was immediately evident that the mud-flats were covered in birds. The 150 dark-bellied Brent geese were examined closely for juveniles to get an idea of how successful their breeding season had been, but sadly only 15 of the barred youngsters could be found. Also on the mud-flats and out on the Fleet were at least 200 Mediterranean gulls.

After a very pleasant picnic lunch we searched the mudflats for waders and soon found several bar-tailed godwits, ringed plovers and dunlins with some oystercatchers in the distance. The star bird was a very smart grey plover which appeared suddenly just in front of us.

Lodmoor RSPB Reserve, 1400

This excellent reserve gave us the opportunity to add a number of wetland birds to the list including shelduck, pochard, gadwall, little egret and grey heron, with a Cetti's warbler giving us an unusually close view. High overhead a female marsh harrier was circling over the reedbeds, with its mate also appearing later on. The highlight of our walk here was the bittern which seen flying over the reeds at close range, but the ruff feeding amongst the samphire was certainly a close second. Walking back towards the car park we enjoyed exceptionally good light as the low autumn sun lit up the birds on the marshes. Some very close snipe were seen and we had the rare chance to compare both species of godwits. Checking through the gulls we found a couple of adult Mediterranean Gulls, one of which was wearing a colour ring indicating that it had come from Europe. After emailing the French ringing scheme co-ordinator, it was established that the bird was ringed as an adult in 2006 just outside Antwerp in Belgium. It was then seen to winter in Portugal and Dorset with one breeding record near Amsterdam.



Wednesday 19 October

Weather: A very pleasant day with hardly any wind and plenty of sunshine.

Arne RSPB Reserve, 1000

We were still in the car park when a flock of fieldfares flew over and became the day's first new species for the trip. This was quickly followed by another as we found a couple of red wings feeding in a rowan tree just behind the information centre. Setting out towards Shipstall Point we soon walked into a mixed

feeding flock. Long-tailed tits, coal tits and goldcrests were seen in quick succession but then a brighter bird with a large wing-bar appeared overhead in a tall oak tree. Just as its identity was confirmed as a yellow-browed warbler the tiny bird disappeared, never to be seen again but pausing to give just one characteristic "swee-wee" call.

Reaching the shores of Poole Harbour we stood for some time enjoying the views across to Long and Round Island but slightly disconcerted by the very close and very rough-looking stag sika just in front of us. It soon became obvious that we were in no danger from this ancient and very tired-looking old fellow so we continued to check out the large number of curlews and redshanks feeding on one of the highest tides of the year.

Next we walked across Arne Heath and soon found the first Dartford warbler of the day. A fairly dull bird, most likely a young female, it was still immediately recognisable with its long tail stuck out at an angle behind it.

The next stop was the hide at Shipstall from which we had a good view of the preparations the BBC were making for next week's Autumnwatch broadcast. There were birds here as well with lots more curlew and wigeon and a couple of female pintail a new addition to the bird list. The highlight here was a pair of peregrines, most likely an adult with a juvenile judging by the aggressive behaviour exhibited. Young peregrines are not at all welcome by their parents at this time of year. The walk back to the car park produced fieldfare and mistle thrush feeding in a large rowan tree and a brief view of a green woodpecker.

After a lunch enlivened by the presence of a pair of great-spotted woodpeckers, we walked out onto Coombe Heath. A second Dartford warbler was found here in the company of a pair of stonechats. From the screen on the shoreline of Middlebere Lake we had close views of curlew and redshank and a distant view of the rarest bird of the day, a great white egret in flight. The nearby hide enabled us to look out onto the western end of the creek where we could see many hundreds of waders, mostly avocets and black-tailed godwits but also including a single knot. A gull swimming along the creek turned out to be a third-year yellow-legged gull on closer examination.

The walk back was made in beautifully calm conditions and produced the third Dartford warbler of the day.



Thursday 20 October

Weather: Mostly cloudy with a light north-easterly wind.

Kingbarrow Quarry, 0900

Our final day started with a walk around the Dorset Wildlife Trust reserve next to the hotel. Throughout our walk flocks of migrants were passing overhead into the northerly wind, mostly redwings, with song thrush, fieldfare and meadow pipit also present. A buzzard sat in the quarry was the only other notable sighting here.

Portland Bird Observatory, 1000

Arriving at the Observatory and hearing that few birds were about we headed off to the Eastcliffs where there was a mixed flock of swallows and martins. Annoyingly they had vanished when we got there, only to reappear when we returned to the Observatory! A very pale buzzard out on the Crown Estate Field was some compensation.

Church Ope Cove, 1100

This very sheltered spot was clearly the warmest place on the island this morning but seemed to have few birds present apart from a couple of chiffchaffs. However, we were lucky enough to see a group of three common scoter head south out on the sea, the 100th species seen this week.

Portland Castle, 1200

The trees here were pretty much our last hope of seeing a yellow-browed warbler, but the cold wind put paid to this so we gave up and headed off the island for lunch. As we were leaving, a kingfisher tried to fly past behind us – but we turned and saw it just in time!

Ferrybridge, 1300

It was now high tide and all the roosting birds were seen at very close range. About 100 brent geese were here, still with very few young. A flock of 20 bar-tailed godwits were with them, as were three grey plovers and a very smart sandwich tern. A close examination of the gull flock revealed a Mediterranean gull with a green colour ring. Another quick email to Camille Duponcheel in France revealed that the bird had been ringed as a chick in 2015 at a site in Vendee on the west coast of France.

Wyke Regis Bridging Camp, 1400

Following a tip-off that a pair of black-throated divers were on the Fleet we parked next to the Royal Engineers Bridging Camp and walked west to a view point overlooking East Fleet. Waiting here for us were thousands of brent geese with a scattering of red-breasted mergansers and great-crested grebes amongst them. As we were watching this wildfowl spectacle a merlin flew across Chesil Beach and, chased by a crow, accelerated over the Fleet and disappeared over the Army firing range at Chickerell.

Radipole RSPB Reserve, 1500

We finished our week in Dorset with a walk round one of the finest urban reserves in the country. Mediterranean gulls are a standard fixture here but our old friend Hoodie the hooded merganser was a particularly welcome sight here especially as he is now in his ninth year at Weymouth! The north end of the reserve held a large number of gadwall and shoveler with several snipe visible at the edge of the reeds.

The week's birding was ended with a very pleasant half hour stood on the bridge at Radipole watching the gulls fly through on their way to the roost in Weymouth Bay.

SPECIES LIST



Birds:

Great crested grebe	Arne, Lodmoor, Fleet
Little grebe	Radipole, Lodmoor
Cormorant	Portland, Radipole, Arne
Shag	Portland
Gannet	Portland Bill
Little egret	Lodmoor, Fleet, Arne
Great white egret	Arne
Grey heron	Radipole, Lodmoor, Fleet, Arne
Bittern	Lodmoor
Mute swan	Radipole
Canada goose	Lodmoor, Arne
Brent goose	Ferrybridge, Fleet
Shelduck	Lodmoor, Arne
Teal	Radipole, Lodmoor, Arne
Mallard	Radipole, Lodmoor, Arne
Shoveler	Radipole, Lodmoor, Arne
Pintail	Arne
Wigeon	Lodmoor, Fleet, Arne
Tufted duck	Radipole, Lodmoor
Pochard	Lodmoor
Common scoter	Portland
Red-breasted merganser	Fleet
Hooded merganser	Radipole
Merlin	Fleet
Kestrel	Portland, Arne
Peregrine	Arne
Marsh harrier	Lodmoor
Hen harrier	Portland Bill
Sparrowhawk	Portland, Arne

Buzzard	Portland, Arne
Pheasant	Portland
Water rail	Lodmoor (heard)
Coot	Radipole, Lodmoor
Moorhen	Radipole, Lodmoor
Curlew	Arne, Fleet
Oystercatcher	Portland, Ferrybridge, Arne
Avocet	Arne
Redshank	Lodmoor, Arne
Bar-tailed godwit	Ferrybridge, Lodmoor, Arne
Black-tailed godwit	Lodmoor, Arne
Dunlin	Ferrybridge, Lodmoor, Arne
Knot	Arne
Ruff	Lodmoor
Snipe	Radipole, Lodmoor
Ringed plover	Ferrybridge
Grey plover	Ferrybridge
Lapwing	Lodmoor
Turnstone	Portland Bill, Fleet, Ferrybridge
Common gull	Portland Bill, Lodmoor
Black-headed gull	various sites
Mediterranean gull	Portland Bill, Ferrybridge, Lodmoor, Radipole
Yellow-legged gull	Arne
Herring gull	various sites
Great black-backed gull	various sites
Sandwich tern	Ferrybridge
Razorbill	Portland Bill
Wood pigeon	various sites
Collared dove	Lodmoor
Feral pigeon	Radipole
Kingfisher	Lodmoor, Portland Castle
Green woodpecker	Arne
Great Spotted woodpecker	Arne
Nuthatch	Arne
Skylark	Portland, Ferrybridge
Treecreeper	Arne (heard)
Swallow	Portland, Radipole
Meadow pipit	Portland, Fleet, Arne
Rock pipit	Portland Bill
Pied wagtail	various sites
Grey wagtail	Portland
Wren	various sites
Dunnock	various sites
Robin	various sites
Stonechat	various sites
Wheatear	Portland Bill
Redwing	Portland, Arne
Fieldfare	Portland, Arne
Song thrush	Portland
Mistle thrush	Arne
Ring ouzel	Portland
Blackbird	various sites
Cetti's warbler	Lodmoor

Dartford warbler	Arne
Blackcap	Portland, Arne
Chiffchaff	various sites
Goldcrest	Arne
Yellow-browed warbler	Portland, Arne
Long-tailed tit	Lodmoor, Arne
Coal tit	Arne
Blue tit	Portland, Lodmoor, Arne
Great tit	Portland, Lodmoor, Arne
Raven	Portland, Arne
Jay	Arne
Magpie	various sites
Jackdaw	Portland, Arne
Rook	Arne
Carrion crow	various sites
Starling	various sites
House sparrow	Portland
Goldfinch	various sites
Chaffinch	Portland, Arne
Greenfinch	Portland, Arne
Linnet	various sites
Reed bunting	Portland (heard)

Mammals:

Grey squirrel	Arne
Sika deer	Arne
Brown rat	Radipole

Insects:

Speckled wood	Arne
Red admiral	various sites
Peacock	Arne
Sloe shield-bug	Arne
Common darter	Arne
Southern hawker	Arne