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Tour Report

UK – Norfolk in Early Summer with Nick Acheson

10-14 June 2019

Norfolk hawker dragonfly



Stone curlew



Bittern



Marsh harrier



Tour Leader: Nick Acheson

Day 1: Monday 10 June 2019

Months in advance, when planning tours to see swallowtail butterflies, dragonflies, wildflowers and summer birds in June, you don't give a great deal of thought to a wild storm hitting — bringing wind, heavy rain and floods — and sticking around for a whole week. But such a storm hit today as you all reached Norfolk for the start of your tour. We met in the early afternoon at Knights Hill Hotel and, despite the rain, decided to head for RSPB Titchwell Marsh. Here we did manage to see a number of very nice birds, including many avocets and Mediterranean gulls, plenty of gadwall, teal and shoveler, a female marsh harrier, a ringed plover, a Sandwich tern, a fleeting bearded tit and a flyover spoonbill. However probably the most striking aspect of the afternoon was the relentless rain, which soaked us through whenever we were foolhardy enough to step outside a hide.

Day 2: Tuesday 11 June 2019

In our original plan we should have headed to the Brecks today, but we decided instead — given the forecast of heavy rain all day — to drive along the North Norfolk coast, in the knowledge that at Norfolk Wildlife Trust Cley Marshes we could at least shelter in the hides. When we reached Cley, it was indeed raining very hard so we sped to Bishop's Hide, the closest of all the hides. We spent an hour here, watching a lovely range of birds doing battle with the weather. Avocets and shelduck were all over the scrape, including several very close to us. A redshank potted right in front of the hide while a black-tailed godwit flew along the back of the scrape. Perhaps our favourites were the newly fledged pied wagtail which poked and pecked in the edge of the reed not far from the hide and the first summer little gull which fed among greylags and shelduck in the middle of the scrape.

Defeated by the driving rain we made our way back to the wonderful Cley visitor centre for coffees, loos, and the chance to buy books from the excellent shop. From here, with lunch in mind, we moved a short distance inland to Glandford where we ate at the Art Café and made a visit to the BirdScapes Gallery.

The rain was relentless so we decided to cut our ornithological losses and drive slowly back along the coast. We called in at Stiffkey to talk about saltmarsh succession, at Wells to admire the celebrated horse sculpture in the harbour and at Brancaster Staithe simply to see the high tide. We reached our hotel, damp but undeterred, in the late afternoon after an impromptu tour of the historic Hanseatic town of King's Lynn.

Day 3: Wednesday 12 June 2019

With the weather forecast to be warmest (and therefore best for swallowtails) on Thursday, today we opted to head for the Brecks, leaving as early as possible for RSPB Lakenheath Fen. Apart from a little drizzle as we drove, we — miraculously — stayed dry all morning and a very fine morning it was too. Initially the marsh seemed quite quiet, apart from the songs of reed warblers, sedge warblers, Cetti's warblers, blackcaps, whitethroats and garden warblers, and the comings and goings of cuckoos. There followed more comings and goings of cuckoos, all morning, and several of you agreed you had not seen so many cuckoos in years. Other birds were slow to get moving, following the rain, so we contented ourselves with watching the mallards, tufted ducks and young coots at the first major pool in the reeds. Little by little the bedraggled marsh harriers began to dry out and appear. A kingfisher also popped in, as did a little egret, though a juvenile bearded tit was only glimpsed.

Further on we saw more marsh harriers, ever closer, a redshank, a few lapwings and more cuckoos. Reaching the final open water on the trail, we were suddenly surrounded by bitterns. One flew across the pool to land at the base of a patch of grey willows to our right. Almost immediately afterwards a second



bird clambered up the reeds to our left and sat for some time largely in the open, briefly accompanied by a bearded tit (while a water rail sang and marsh harriers perched in the distance, making for a very East Anglian reedbed scene). The second bittern then flew right, but not before the first had woven its way through the reed at the back of the pool, searching for prey. Just before we left the pool, a third bittern flew across the back of the huge reedbed. Wonderful!

Walking back we saw a pair of the last bird we were specially hoping to see: hobby. So we left Lakenheath delighted both to have escaped the rain for at least half a day of our tour and to have seen most of its charismatic birds. With rain forecast for the whole afternoon we decided to head to NWT Weeting Heath before lunch. This was definitely the right decision as our hour there was largely dry. From the west hide we saw a fine stone curlew, which was joined by a common curlew and a lapwing. From the east hide we saw a further stone curlew, though this was hunkered against the ground and very hard to make out. In the poor light we were unable to find a firecrest which briefly sang by the visitor centre but we did see a few coal tits, a goldcrest and a treecreeper.

As we reached Brandon to buy some sandwiches for lunch, the rain began again and soon became heavy. We decided to cut our losses, skip visiting Lynford Arboretum and head back to King's Lynn. On reaching our hotel, in much lighter rain, we decided we would make one last assault on Norfolk's wildlife today and most of us headed to Dersingham Bog NNR. Birds here were quite few — a couple of pairs of shelduck, a sprinkling of stonechats, some singing skylarks and a cock linnet — but we admired such botanical wonders as bog asphodel, round-leaved sundew, climbing corydalis, cross-leaved heath and heath bedstraw.

Day 4: Thursday 13 June 2019

Of all the miracles, today we mostly escaped the rain. At King's Lynn it was — predictably — raining but as we made our way towards the Broads the rain began to abate. Our first destination was NWT Upton Broad and Marshes which was decidedly damp underfoot. Nonetheless we made the acquaintance of southern marsh and common spotted orchids and some greatly rarer orchids too. We then took another path, through carr woodland and into a patch of restored fen. Here, as the day became warmer, we encountered no fewer than ten species of Odonata: Norfolk hawk, emperor dragonfly, hairy dragonfly, four-spotted chaser, black-tailed skimmer, large red damselfly, common blue damselfly, blue-tailed damselfly, azure damselfly and variable damselfly. There were also plenty of speckled woods and painted ladies (the latter part of a massive migration taking place) but we were unable to find Norfolk's most iconic insect, the swallowtail. Other highlights here included frogbit, water soldier, marsh pea, marsh lousewort and marsh fern. Walking beyond the fen, towards the grazing marshes we enjoyed fine views of hobbies, marsh harriers and lapwings irate at the presence of the marsh harriers.

We stopped for lunch at Fairhaven Water Gardens before calling at NWT Ranworth Broad. Here too we searched for swallowtails, extending our search to swallowtail eggs on the many milk parsley plants we saw in the fen, but were unable to find any. We did see plenty of nesting common terns, displaying great crested grebes, hordes of moulting greylag geese and plants including skullcap, royal fern, purple and yellow loosestrife, southern marsh orchid, orange balsam, common valerian and alder buckthorn.

By now the weather was again looking threatening, so we headed back to the northwest of Norfolk and into the rain. On our way back we stopped by a number of fields in the hope of seeing hares but the crops were too high. We did, however, hear a singing yellowhammer and see a curlew, which for a moment we thought would be a hare. The heavy rain didn't stop a couple of us going out in the dusk to NWT Roydon Common where we saw four hares, heard several skylarks singing ridiculously late into the night, saw a roding woodcock a number of times (or several roding woodcocks once) and heard two nightjars.



Day 5: Friday 14 June 2019

Our final morning was wet but, by now inured to the weather, we returned at six to Dersingham Bog NNR in search of woodlarks. We did not succeed in seeing woodlarks but we did see three tree pipits in song (sadly, most likely, because they had lost their broods to the rain), plenty of shelducks, and a stonechat chick being ringed. Having had breakfast back at Knights Hill we said our damp farewells and parted company.

You all deserve great praise and thanks for having remained so good humoured and enthusiastic through a trying week. As trying as it was, we too tried, and as a result we did — albeit damply — see much of the wonderful wildlife Norfolk has to offer in early summer.



Checklist

Greylag goose *Anser anser*

Mute swan *Cygnus olor*

Egyptian goose *Alopochen aegyptiaca*

Common shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Northern shoveler *Spatula clypeata*

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Eurasian teal *Anas crecca*

Tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*

Common pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Red-legged partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Several seen displaying by the visitor centre at NWT Ranworth Broad.

Eurasian spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

One young bird flew over RSPB Titchwell Marsh in the rain on our very wet afternoon visit there.

Eurasian bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

We saw three bitterns from the watchpoint at the far end of RSPB Lakenheath Fen.

Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*

Little egret *Egretta garzetta*

Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Eurasian sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Western marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Common at coastal and inland wetlands, notably RSPB Titchwell Marsh and Lakenheath Fen.

Red kite *Milvus milvus*

Common buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Water rail *Rallus aquaticus*

Heard at RSPB Lakenheath Fen.

Common moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Eurasian coot *Fulica atra*

Eurasian stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*

Seen from both hides at NWT Weeting Heath.

Eurasian oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Common at coastal wetlands.

Pied avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Likewise common at coastal wetlands, notably NWT Cley Marshes and RSPB Titchwell Marsh.

Northern lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

In addition to birds seen elsewhere, there were numerous lapwings displaying over the grazing marshes at NWT Upton Broad and Marshes.

Ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Seen through heavy rain at RSPB Titchwell Marsh.

Eurasian curlew *Numenius arquata*

Seen over nesting habitat at NWT Weeting Heath and in fields near our hotel.

Black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa*

Seen at both RSPB Titchwell Marsh and NWT Cley Marshes.

Ruddy turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Eurasian woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*

Seen roding at NWT Roydon Common on our last rainy night.

Common redshank *Tringa totanus*

Black-headed gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Little gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*

Mediterranean gull *Ichthyaetus melanopterus*

Literally hundreds of these gorgeous birds, among many hundreds of black-headed gulls, on the predator-fenced island at RSPB Titchwell Marsh.

Great black-backed gull *Larus marinus*

European herring gull *Larus argentatus*

Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus*

Sandwich tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

Because the weather put paid to our boat trip, we saw relatively few terns. However a few were present over RSPB Titchwell Marsh on our first evening.

Common tern *Sterna hirundo*

Nesting in numbers at NWT Ranworth Broad.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Common woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*

Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

All of you agreed that for years you had not seen and heard so many cuckoos as we did at RSPB Lakenheath Fen.

European nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*

Two heard briefly in the rain on the final evening. Each previous evening had been too rainy to contemplate looking for them.

Common swift *Apus apus*

Common kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

One hovered in front of us at RSPB Lakenheath Fen.

European green woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Great spotted woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Common kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Eurasian hobby *Falco Subbuteo*

We saw these gorgeous little falcons at RSPB Lakenheath Fen and at NWT Upton Broad.

Eurasian jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Eurasian magpie *Pica pica*

Western jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Coal tit *Periparus ater*

Marsh tit *Poecile palustris*

Eurasian blue tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Great tit *Parus major*

Bearded tit *Panurus biarmicus*

On the first afternoon we heard bearded tits at RSPB Titchwell Marsh. A juvenile bird gave brief views at Lakenheath Fen.

Eurasian skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Barn swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Common house martin *Delichon urbicum*

Cetti's warbler *Cettia cetti*

The explosive song of this skulking bird was new for some of you at RSPB Lakenheath Fen.

Long-tailed tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Willow warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Common chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Sedge warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

Eurasian reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Common grasshopper warbler *Locustella naevia*

Eurasian blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Garden warbler *Sylvia borin*

Common whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

Common firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*

Heard very briefly at NWT Weeting Heath as we walked towards the first hide.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Eurasian wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Eurasian treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Common starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Common blackbird *Turdus merula*

Song thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Mistle thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

European robin *Erithacus rubecula*

European stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

We saw lots of these lovely birds at Dersingham Bog on our final morning, including a couple of chicks being ringed by the North West Norfolk Stonechat Group.

House sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Pied wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Tree pipit *Anthus trivialis*

No fewer than three of these strident birds were in song at Dersingham Bog, though sadly this very likely indicated that the rain had destroyed their previous nests.

Common chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Eurasian bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

European greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

Common linnet *Linaria cannabina*

European goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

Common reed bunting *Emberiza shoeniclus*

