

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



Tour Report

Lancashire Long Weekend in Autumn

26 - 30 October 2018

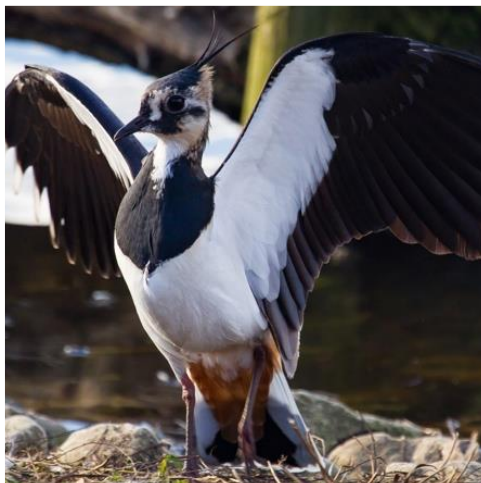
Marsh tit



European robin



Northern lapwing



Eurasian treecreeper



Compiled by: Chris Griffin

Tour Leader: Chris Griffin with 5 participants

Day 1: Arrive Conder Green

Friday 26 October 2018

Our arrival at The Mill at Conder Green was a little sporadic, some of the party arriving the day before, and some unfortunately arriving quite late due to bad traffic on the M6, so the decision was made to take an early night. After some warm introductions and a lovely evening meal we all retired to our rooms.

Weather: Sunny, nine degrees

Day 2: Leighton Moss RSPB & Morecambe Bay

Saturday 27 October 2018

After a leisurely breakfast we set off for the RSPB's flagship reserve in the North-west, Leighton Moss. This vast reed bed reserve, the size of 2,500 football pitches, came under the care of the RSPB in 1964 and since then has gone from strength to strength, and we were all very excited to get out and explore.

As we got out of the minibus, a flurry of Eurasian blue and great tits were noted in the trees and a goldcrest was heard and seen briefly as we walked into the visitor centre. After a quick chat to one of the very helpful staff, we chose to walk the woodland trail towards the Tim Jackson and Grisedale hides, as bearded tits had been showing well from along the footpath. As we entered the woodland, a stunning male Eurasian bullfinch perched out briefly on one of the bushes, so we waited a few minutes hoping he would re-appear. He provided the group with only tantalizing views, as is often the case with Eurasian bullfinch, but his mate showed a little better before slinking back into the depths of the cover.

Further along the trail we came across a small clearing where a host of species worked their way along some overhanging branches above one of the ditches, including a very showy Eurasian nuthatch and a very elusive Eurasian treecreeper. All around us were the contact calls of several species of tit, dunnoek and common chaffinches and it felt like we were surrounded with movement.

After a few minutes we carried on and turned up the path in between the reeds, where a small group of birdwatchers were congregating, one of them waving at us to come quickly. As we reached them we discovered that this was the place where the RSPB had put out grit trays for the bearded tits and, sure enough, a stunning pair were utilizing one of them and picking away at the grit. Although called a tit, bearded tit are actually part of the babbler family and the only species of such to be found in the UK. We watched the dapper pair for several minutes until we'd had our fill and made our way to the Tim Jackson and Grisedale hides.

Leighton Moss is renowned for its importance for wintering wildfowl, and these hides certainly showed why with Eurasian teal, mallard, Eurasian wigeon, Northern shoveller and greylag all in good numbers, with the added surprise of a late juvenile garganey which showed well from the Grisedale hide. Malcolm picked out a great egret which spent its time fishing at the edge of the pool and gave great views of what is still a pretty rare bird in the UK, especially up in the North-west. Also along the edges of some of the pools were cryptically plumaged common snipe, one of which showing right out in the open feeding and showing some interesting behaviour - bobbing up and down while it probed for its meal.

On our wander back to the vehicles for a quick hot drink in the visitor centre, we came across a delightfully showy Eurasian treecreeper, showing only down to a few metres as it searched for insects amongst the boughs of the willows next to us, as well as being followed around by some of the friendliest European robins most of us had had the pleasure of meeting!

After our drinks, we headed across to the other side of the reserve towards the causeway and Lower hide. Before we set out, we had a quick look at the feeding station next to the visitor centre which was bustling



with common chaffinches and tits. A smart male brambling, only recently arrived on migration from its breeding grounds, showed briefly but well and we decided to move on towards the north end of the reserve. Along the route we had some nice views of a female common reed bunting feeding on the edge of the path and nearer the hide, we came across a small tit flock which included a couple of very confident marsh tits, delighting everybody with some exceptional views.

As we arrived at the Lower hide, there seemed to be a lack of wildfowl, although a female common goldeneye was found diving in the middle of the lake. A stunning marsh harrier floated gracefully over the reeds at the far side of the lake, before the surprise of the day appeared in the form of an otter that swam across in front of the hide from one side of the lake to the other.

Before long it was time to head back to the minibus to grab lunch and head over to Morecambe Bay. The first part of Morecambe Bay we visited held the tidal pools, around a kilometre away from Leighton Moss itself. Along the track we came across a lovely female Eurasian stonechat and a couple of northern ravens circling and croaking high above the hillscape. Near the hide we came across yet another very confident European robin..... I don't know what they feed them up there, but it certainly makes them extremely friendly!

We arrived at the Allen hide and, almost as soon as we were there, a common kingfisher darted out and back into a channel to the right of the hide. It came out several times and was even chased by another at one point, but kept to the channel and refused to perch out in the open for us.

On the islands within the pools there were more wildfowl, a scattering of Eurasian teal, Eurasian wigeon and mallard mostly, but three common merganser, or goosander as they are more commonly known in the UK, which were loafing on one of the nearest islands, was a nice addition to the list. Unfortunately, no more than 15 minutes before we had arrived at the hides, there had been over 2,000 black-tailed godwit feeding on the pools, but they had departed toward the estuary as the tide was out. There were still a few still feeding in front of the Eric Morecambe hide, along with several common redshank and dunlin, and a small group of waders further to the back of the pool revealed themselves to be common greenshank roosting.

We moved on from the hides and made the short trip down to Hest Bank on the south side of Morecambe Bay for our second stop of the afternoon. With the tide out, unfortunately most of the waders were very distant, but there was still plenty to see from the shore. Hundreds of Eurasian oystercatchers, Eurasian curlew and common redshank were searching and probing the mud along the estuary and common shelducks lined up by their thousands along the sands. We spent a bit of time scanning the sands for anything else to catch our eye and in the distance a huge flock of thousands of waders could be seen, too far to tell what they were for certain, but they were most likely dunlin. It certainly gave us an indication why this area was so important for wintering shorebirds.

We moved along to our last brief stop at Boulton-le-Sands where we again scanned the sands to see more Eurasian oystercatchers, Eurasian curlew, dunlin, common redshank and, of course, many more common shelduck and a few little egrets flew past gracefully. We watched the setting sun and, as the temperature dropped, we decided to call it a day and made our way back to the hotel where we enjoyed a lovely evening meal and some great conversation before retiring to our rooms.

Weather: Dry, sunny, seven degrees. N/NE 15kph

Day 3: Ribble Estuary, Marshside RSPB & Martin Mere WWT

Sunday 28 October 2018

After another hearty breakfast, we started our morning with an hour's drive down towards the Ribble Estuary. This area is another of the North-west jewels in its crown, again another incredibly important area for wintering wildfowl and shorebirds. With over 9,000 hectares of mudflats, saltmarshes and tidal pools, it is easy to see why it has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest with many Special Protection areas and Ramsar sites.

The first port of call was Hesketh Out Marsh RSPB, but as we were nearing the reserve, we pulled into a layby to have a quick look over some fields where we'd noticed quite a bit of activity. Northern lapwings and European golden plover were found running around, including a particularly close individual which gave great views. The rest of the flock were a couple of fields a bit further back, but seemed quite nervous and skittish about something, often taking flight and wheeling around, the reason for which soon became apparent as we found a juvenile peregrine falcon sat on the ground in the next field to them. We watched it for a little while before making our way to Hesketh Out Marsh.

We arrived at the car park and walked up the bank to the viewing platform where a decent flock of 50 or so Eurasian tree sparrows showed really well in the bushes below us – a real treat for us as they are now not a very common bird at all; in fact, Eurasian tree sparrow had declined by a staggering 93 per cent between 1970 and 2008, but recent Breeding Bird Survey data suggests the population may have started to increase again, so it was a pleasure to watch these beautiful sparrows at close quarters through the telescopes.

At the viewpoint, the lagoons were stuffed to the brim with thousands of Eurasian teal and Eurasian wigeon, with more and more birds flying in and out ... a real hive of activity. While we were there, a drake American wigeon was found loafing in the midst of the flocks and good views were had of this rare vagrant to our shores. More common redshank and a couple of black-tailed godwit fed along the fringes of the lagoons and the sky was busy with a decent movement of Eurasian skylark, trilling their hearts out as they went on their way. We also noticed a distant group of swans in one of the fields from the viewpoint which we were reliably informed was a group of whooper swans that had been present for a couple of weeks, but they were far too distant to see the bill colour, so had to take it on faith that they were indeed whoopers.

It was then time to move on from Hesketh and make our way to our second stop of the day, Marshside RSPB. As we approached the car park, our first flock of pink-footed geese was feeding in a field by the roadside. We weren't able to stop to get better views of them as there was nowhere to pull in, but we didn't need to worry, as when we made our way down to the hide after pulling into the car park there were plenty to be seen on the flooded fields on the reserve. Another group of European golden plover were found flying over the reserve and five ruff were found mixed in with the lapwings, running around on the turf hunting for invertebrates.

We spent a bit of time in the hide and took the opportunity to use the facilities before we made our way across the road to Crossens Outer Marsh where a hen harrier had been seen half an hour earlier. A small group of birders had congregated, looking over the vast saltmarsh, hoping to catch a glimpse of the hen harrier, but we were not to be so lucky. We did, however, get to see a fabulous male merlin perched on a fencepost and everybody enjoyed tremendous views through the telescopes of the UK's smallest falcon. A distant circling harrier caused a bit of excitement, but was identified as a marsh harrier and not the hoped-for hen harrier.

With time getting on, we made our way back to the minibus and made the short journey over to Martin Mere WWT. After having a spot of lunch by the bus in the car park and a quick coffee in the café, we made our way onto the reserve. The first hide we visited was the In Focus hide near the main entrance, where we were treated to much better views of a ruff as it moved amongst the ducks mere metres from the hide, but of course the highlight were the wildfowl. Northern shoveler, northern pintail, gadwall, mallard, tufted duck and Eurasian wigeon were absolutely plentiful, common shelduck and Eurasian teal could also be seen



in the mix and our first really good views of whooper swan were had, most in family groups and often 'whooping' to each other. Martin Mere WWT is a really important wintering site for these large swans, spending the winter after their long migrations from Russia in the relatively warmer climate of the UK.

We spent the afternoon exploring the other hides around the reserve, seeing more and more pink-footed geese totaling up to 3,000 or thereabouts, their squeaky calls echoing around as they flew over. Another peregrine falcon was seen from the Ron Barker hide and a brief but exciting encounter with a Eurasian sparrowhawk was had as it flashed low across the lake in front of the same hide. One of the special events at Martin Mere is the daily feeding of the ducks, swans and geese and we knew the time was near when a steady flow of whooper swans flying in from the fields they had been grazing during the day started to come in. We made our way to the Discovery hide where the WWT staff gave an informative talk about the reserve and its avian visitors and began the afternoon feed. The throng of wildfowl cramming only metres in front of the hide was a truly remarkable sight. It gave us all the opportunity to see the ducks and swans much closer than is possible at other places and we could really see the intricacies of their plumage. The vermiculations of gadwall and teal, the beautiful draping scapulars of northern pintail and the spade-like bills of northern shoveler – a really fantastic experience!

After feeding time we made our way to the extravagantly shaped Harrier hide where we heard a couple of Cetti's warblers which were singing somewhere deep in the reed beds and saw a fly-by second-winter common gull which was new for the trip list. The lake in front of the hide was rather quiet so we decided to head towards the visitor centre. With a little bit of time remaining before the reserve closed for the day, we decided to split up a little and saunter back slowly to meet back at the centre. A few of the group chose have another look at the wildfowl on the main lake, whilst Malcolm and I took the opportunity to wander through the enclosures which the WWT reserve are renowned for.

We met back at the centre just before closing time and after another busy but thoroughly enjoyable day, drove back to the hotel where we were again treated to a pleasant evening meal and chat before calling it a night.

Weather: Dry, bright, nine degrees. Cold NE 15kph

Day 4: Pilling Lane End & Knott End

Monday 29 October 2018

With only half a day available to us, we decided to take a look at the Lune Estuary and headed off towards Pilling Lane End.

We got out of the minibus and had great views of another flock of Eurasian tree sparrows in the bushes next to us, and a song thrush appeared briefly but dove into cover before some of the group were able to see it - amazingly only our second thrush of the weekend! As we made our way up the embankment to view out to the saltmarsh, again a steady flow of Eurasian skylark passed overhead along with meadow pipits and common linnets. A flock of pink-footed geese were busy grazing and preening in the field next to the minivan and Eurasian curlews flew over in ones and twos, moving up and down the shore looking for suitable places to forage.

Out on the mudflats and saltmarshes there were more common shelduck, Eurasian oystercatcher, common redshank, dunlin and Eurasian curlew in very good numbers but, as we started to move further up the path, we stopped in our tracks as a female hen harrier suddenly appeared from around the corner. We watched her as she gracefully quartered over the saltmarsh, causing more than a few birds to sound out panicked alarm calls. We may have had only a minute or two watching her before she doubled back and made her way towards where she had originally come from, but the views we had were wonderful and rather exhilarating!



A large flock of pink-footed geese was then noticed over the horizon that had taken off from the field in the distance, easily numbering several thousand and we watched them drifting away in their vast skeins.

We wandered a short distance along the bank to have a brief look to see if we could see the hen harrier quartering around the corner, but she had found somewhere out of sight to spend her time. We did have a lovely male Eurasian sparrowhawk appear and circle around and some great views of grey wagtail and a skylark taking a quick dust bath, before a local lady stopped to have a chat with us and let us know about a flock of twite that were being seen a little further down the coast at Knott End. With the lure of a café right next door to where the twite were showing, we went back to the minibus and made the quick trip to Knott End.

The slipway where the twite had been was devoid of birds as we arrived, but almost immediately a couple of small birds dropped in to land right next to us which were indeed our targets. We got lovely views of them as they sat on the edge of the slipway before they took flight again and headed further up the coast. With the tide coming in, we had a look out on the mudflats and were delighted to find a stunning female peregrine falcon sat on a small patch of rocks in the middle of the channel. The mudflats are notoriously flat and the tide really speeds in and as we watched, her rocky perch started disappearing right before our eyes. It wasn't long before she decided it would be better to find a higher perch than to get her feet wet and she moved off to land on the building on the other side of the estuary to us.

We had a quick coffee in the café to refresh ourselves and, as time was starting to run out, we started our journey back towards the hotel. We had one last attempt to find another place to view the mudflats at Cockersands to see if any waders had been pushed in by the tide, but we were unable to find any parking and the tide had rushed all the way in. We did come across a small flock of redwing and fieldfares which were the first of the weekend, but time had run out so we made our way back to the hotel to decamp, say our fondest farewells and depart after a wonderful weekend.

Weather: Dry, bright and mild, eight degrees. NE 10kph

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
	BIRDS	AVES			
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓	
2	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓
3	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓	✓
4	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓
5	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓	✓
6	Common shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓
7	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>	✓		
8	Northern shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	
9	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓	
10	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	
11	American wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>		✓	
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	
13	Northern pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓	

14	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	
15	Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓	
16	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	
17	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓
18	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓		
19	Common merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓		
20	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓
21	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓	✓	✓
22	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓		
23	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓
24	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	
25	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓		
26	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓
27	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓
28	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓
29	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	
30	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓
31	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓
32	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	

33	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	
34	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓		✓
35	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓
36	European golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓	✓
37	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓
38	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓
39	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		✓	
40	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓		✓
41	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓		✓
42	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓
43	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	✓		
44	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓
45	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓
46	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓
47	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓
48	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓
49	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	
50	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓	
51	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓

52	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓
53	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓		
54	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	
55	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓
56	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		✓	
57	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓	✓
58	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓
59	Western jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
60	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			✓
61	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
62	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓		✓
63	Coal tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓	
64	Marsh tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>	✓		
65	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
66	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
67	Bearded reedling	<i>Parus biarmicus</i>		✓	
68	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓
69	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓	
70	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓

71	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓		
72	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
73	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓		
74	Eurasian treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	✓		
75	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
76	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
77	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓
78	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓
79	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓
80	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓
81	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
82	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓		
83	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓
84	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓	✓
85	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓		✓
86	Western yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>			✓
87	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓
89	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓
90	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓

91	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
92	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	✓		
93	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓		
94	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓
95	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		✓	✓
96	Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		☐	✓
97	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓
98	Common reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓		✓
			☐		☐
	OTHER SPECIES				
1	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	✓		
2	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	✓		
3	Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum stiolatum</i>	✓		