

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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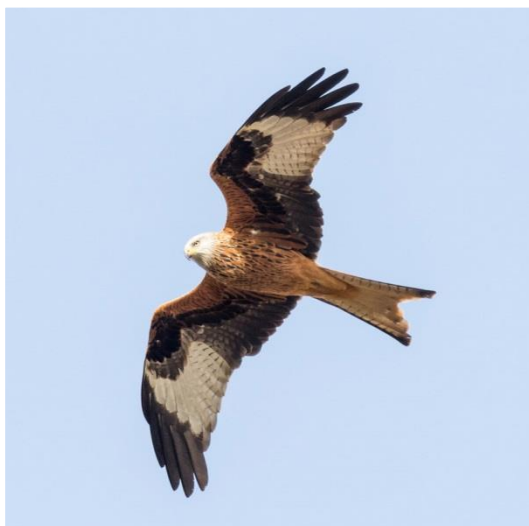


Tour Report

UK – Norfolk in Late Winter with Nick Acheson

18-21 February 2020

Red kite



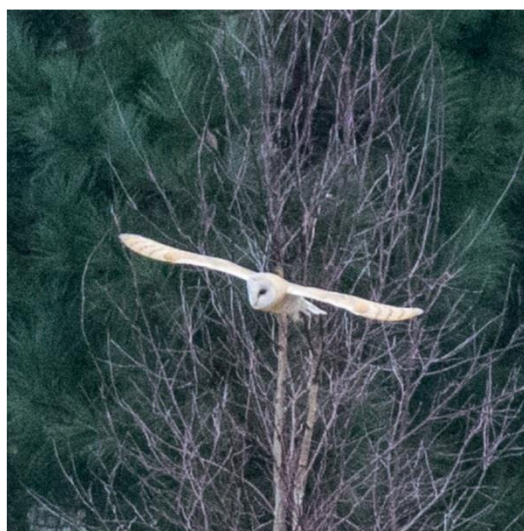
Snow bunting



Marsh tit



Barn owl



Compiled by: Nick Acheson
Images by: Chris Hutchinson

Tour Leader: Nick Acheson

Day 1: Tuesday 18 February

We met this afternoon at two, checked into our rooms, and reconvened at half past three to visit a nearby raptor roost. This was an excellent move as here we saw a number of harriers. The marsh harriers were all first winter birds, with gorgeous golden caps, so it was hard to judge how many there were in total. Certainly there were two together and it is likely we saw around four individuals. More exciting still were four hen harriers, two adult males which we saw together on several occasions, and two first winter ringtails, which were never seen together, but the first of which was associating with the males at the roost, long before another bird appeared from far to the left much later.

A large flock of lapwings was repeatedly disturbed from its roost in the mire by the two male hen harriers and a flock of curlews flew over towards the coast, having clearly been inland in farmland for the day. There were also plenty of linnets, yellowhammers and meadow pipits calling as they flew over.

We met again for dinner at seven and enjoyed an early night before heading off to the North Norfolk coast the following day.

Day 2: Wednesday 19 February

Today was a cold but wonderful day along the North Norfolk coast. We began it by heading to Titchwell RSPB Reserve, though roadworks in Hunstanton saw us taking a detour along the top of the cliffs. No sooner had we left the car park at Titchwell than we were watching a water rail in a ditch by the path at extremely close range, while in the grazing marsh to the west of us was a large flock of greylag geese, surrounded by lapwings, with a few Canada geese thrown in for good measure. Walking a little further we scanned the freshwater marsh, seeing a sprinkling of shoveler, teal and redshank, with a tight winter flock of avocets in the distance by an island. All along the bottom of the bank, in the cut reed, there were teal and this year's Titchwell water pipit flew up calling, landing close to the Parrinder Hide. There we sped and managed to have close-up views of this subtly lovely bird, while also seeing knot (speaking of subtly lovely) on the brackish marsh to the north. Some shelduck (unsubtly lovely) were here too. An adult winter-plumaged Mediterranean gull also flew over shouting its characteristic call.

On the tidal lagoon there were many birds, including black-tailed and bar-tailed godwits, little grebe, wigeon, dark-bellied brent goose, little egret and an elegant pair of pintail. On the beach there were even more birds and here we admired grey plover, dunlin, sanderling (in flight), knot, turnstone, grey plover and lots of bar-tailed godwits. The sea however was too rough, and too full of sediments which have poured out of east coast rivers thanks to Storms Ciara and Dennis, for us to see anything but a flyby female red-breasted merganser. As we walked back along the bank we caught a male marsh harrier yelping and tumbling in early territorial display.

From Titchwell we tracked back the short distance to Thornham where a posse of twite was exactly where we expected. There were more marsh harriers here too. Driving back through Titchwell we screeched to a halt in the entrance of a hotel staff car park, in order to watch a gorgeous hunting barn owl, much to the consternation of the kitchen staff who stared as we turned around. Inland, around Choseley, there were plenty of brown hares, lapwings and red-legged partridges, plus a scattering of stock doves and a hedge full of chaffinches and goldfinches.

We stopped for lunch at Burnham Deepdale, where a red kite flew low over the car park, before moving on to Burnham Overy Dunes. From the roadside, looking down over the freshmarshes and dunes, we could see many lapwings and greylags, plus glimpses of distant great egrets. We found another roadside parking spot at the southeast corner of Holkham Park and from here we saw a large group of Russian white-fronted geese, lots of greylags, marsh harriers and three great egrets.

From here we bypassed Holkham and went to the west end of Wells, to pay our respects to the rough-legged buzzard who has spent virtually the whole winter in the same elder bush in a corner of a scrubby field. There were lots of dark-bellied brent geese in the same field, plus plenty of lapwings and herring and black-headed gulls in the flooded field opposite. As the rain began we headed back to Lady Ann's Drive and walked out to the saltmarsh at the top of the beach, hearing a singing mistle thrush as we went. Before the rain got too heavy we found a lovely group of around thirty-five snow buntings. The five shorelarks which have spent this winter here had been seen shortly before we arrived but the rain came down ever heavier and the shorelarks were nowhere to be found. In our search we walked down to the dunes, and scanning the sea found a huge raft of common scoters offshore, plus a drake red-breasted merganser quite close in, but shorelarks were not forthcoming. Having seen hen harriers wonderfully the previous evening, and with the rain falling harder and the light failing early, we decided not to make our last stop of the day — at a nearby raptor roost — and chose instead to return to Knights Hill for hot showers and dinner.

Day 3: Thursday 20 February

Our second full day was far tougher than the first. We had breakfast at six thirty in order to get out early and make the most of the day before the forecast rain arrived at lunchtime. We went first to Santon Downham, via a handsome barn owl at Hilborough. Along the Little Ouse, wind moving the trees and low grey cloud made finding birds difficult. We didn't find the lesser spotted woodpeckers which live along this stretch of river but did manage to see siskin, treecreeper, marsh tit, long-tailed tit, little grebe and great spotted woodpecker, in addition to having a fine sniff of an otter spraint.

From here we backtracked to a well known goshawk site. Here though the wind was howling, even blowing my tripod over (though we managed to catch it), so, after a flyby group of fieldfares, we quickly gave up on any hope of goshawks displaying and headed south again to Lynford Arboretum. Here our luck began to turn. We quickly met coal, great and blue tits and heard a singing goldcrest (which some later saw). Down at the paddocks we waited a short while, seeing first a chaffinch, then a singing greenfinch, before a pair of hawfinches flew over and finally a hawfinch flew in and landed in the top of a tree, giving us excellent views. Walking back we found a firecrest in a tangle of ivy (or rather my friend Harry, who is studying curlews for his PhD, found it and we enjoyed it). We then crossed the road and checked out the lake, adding lesser black-backed gull, tufted duck and great crested grebe to our list.

We called for lunch at Brown's Cafe in Mundford, which was excellent. However, as predicted, heavy rain began to fall during lunch, hammering the corrugated metal roof of the cafe. With constant rain forecast for most of the afternoon, we decided to pop in to Brandon Country Park and say hello to the mandarins in the rain, before calling it a day. We saw around fifteen very wet, but nonetheless spectacular, mandarins and began the journey back to Lynn.

As we approached Lynn the skies cleared so most of us opted to return to the nearest raptor roost, and we were jolly glad we did. In addition to kestrel, buzzard and a small number of first winter marsh harriers, we saw a first winter hen harrier and a gorgeous male sparrowhawk in perfect evening light. Best of all, however, were two short-eared owls, which passed over high, one of them being mobbed by a crow.

Day 4: Friday 21 February

This morning we turned cheap twitchers and went to the pile of dung in Sedgeford where a stunning male eastern yellow wagtail has spent the winter. After a short while (in very cold wind) watching three pied wagtails, we made the acquaintance of the EYW. All the scepticism voiced the previous evening about North Norfolk dung quickly vanished and we felt very lucky to see this exceptionally rare bird (Norfolk's first and one of the first in the UK), dung or no dung.

From here we headed to the next village, Ringstead, determined to find a grey partridge. To this end I screeched to a halt in every gate, but every partridge we saw was red-legged. The partridges were outnumbered in these fields only by hares. There were even more hares where we stopped to walk outside

Ringstead, and even more red-legged partridges, but eventually we found a pair of grey partridges scuttling along a hedge.

Our final stop was at Dersingham Bog, which is worth a visit purely for its beautiful (and decidedly un-Norfolk) view. The whole time we were there a barn owl hunted the heath quite close to us (after so many sightings, surely the signature bird of our tour). To our surprise it put up our final new bird of the tour, when it flushed a snipe. From here we headed back to Knights Hill where, at the end of a windy but very enjoyable tour, we said good bye and headed for home. Thank you all very much for your splendid company during our four days together and for loving the beautiful birds of Norfolk quite as much as they deserve.

Checklist

THE TRAVELLING
NATURALIST

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
	BIRDS	AVES				
1	Brent goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓		
2	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓		
3	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓
4	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓		
5	White-fronted goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		✓		
6	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓		
7	Egyptian goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓	✓	
8	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	
9	Mandarin duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>			✓	
10	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓		
11	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓	✓	
12	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓		
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	
14	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓		
15	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓		

16	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓	
17	Common scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		✓		
18	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓		
19	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓		✓
20	Grey partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>				✓
21	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 white egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓		
26	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	
27	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	
28	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	
29	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
30	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓		✓	
31	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓	✓	
32	Rough-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>		✓		
33	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		✓		
35	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓	

36	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	
37	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓		
38	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓		
39	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓		
40	Golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓		
41	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓		
42	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		
43	Bar-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓		
44	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓		
45	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓		
46	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		✓		
47	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		✓		
48	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓		
49	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓		
50	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				
51	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓		
52	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		
53	Mediterranean gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>		✓		
54	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		
55	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓		

56	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		
57	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓
58	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓	✓	✓
59	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓
60	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓	✓
61	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		✓	✓	✓
62	Short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			✓	
63	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓	
64	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓	
66	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	
67	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓		✓	
70	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			✓	
71	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			✓	
72	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	
73	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	
74	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	H	✓	✓	✓
75	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H		

76	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		H	✓	
77	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			✓	
78	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓	
79	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	✓	✓	H
80	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓	
81	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		H	✓	
82	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	
83	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓
84	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓	
85	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		H	H	
86	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	H	✓
87	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	
88	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓	
89	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	
90	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			H	
91	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓
92	Eastern yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla tschutschensis</i>				✓
93	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Water pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		✓		
95	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

96	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			✓	
97	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓	
98	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		✓		
99	Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓		
101	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			✓	
102	Snow bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		✓		
103	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	✓		✓	✓
104	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	H	
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA				
1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓	
2	Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓	✓	✓
3	Grey squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>		✓	✓	
4	Western roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			✓	
5	Reeves' muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>		✓	✓	✓