

Norfolk species lists and trip report, 4th to 8th December 2017

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



Norfolk 2017

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#	DATE	LOCATIONS
1	4 th Dec	arrival, The Old Rectory, Crostwick
2	5 th Dec	The Broads: Horsey Gap, Eccles-by-the-Sea, Stubb Mill
4	6 th Dec	Mid-Yare Valley: Buckenham Marshes and Strumpshaw Fen, Mid Yare NNR
5	7 th Dec	North Norfolk: Cley Marsh NWT Reserve, Holkham NNR
7	8 th Dec	depart

Leaders

Philip Precey, Wildlife Travel

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A gallery of photos from the trip can be found at
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/wildlifetravel/albums/72157667229573849>



Cover: Grey Seal pup, Horsey

Above: Starling murmuration at Strumpshaw Fen (Laurie Jackson)

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5th December 2017. The Broads. After our first night in the Old Rectory, and the first of several full English breakfasts, we met up with our driver, Linda, and headed off through the lanes and villages into the Broads.

After a somewhat circuitous route (is there any other kind of route, in Norfolk?), our first stop was at the wonderfully empty beach car park at Horsey Gap, from where we walked a short way through the sand dunes to the viewing point. The beach was littered with Grey Seals: massive thick-necked and Roman-nosed males lolling near the water and occasionally chasing each other across the beach, with several impressive fights taking place, with plenty of neck-biting and spilled blood; smaller females snoozing the morning away or noisily interacting with their neighbours; and everywhere white fluffy pups. Last week's count was of an impressive 962 seal pups, along with 1,370 adults on the beach, the third most important breeding site on the English east coast (after Donna Nook and Lindisfarne).

Alas, try as we might, we couldn't pick out any Common Seals amongst their larger Grey cousins. A single Sanderling paused briefly on the beach for a characteristic run about in the surf before heading off southwards, while out at sea quite a few Red-throated Divers were flying past, albeit quite far out and not pausing long enough to pose.

After our fill of seal action, we struck inland towards the village of Horsey. In the distance several large skeins of Pink-footed Geese were flying back and forth, and we passed a trio of Stonechats in a weedy field corner, with both Fieldfare and Redwing along the hedgerows and a very confiding party of 15 Long-tailed Tits.

After a short rest by the fire in the Nelson's Head, a roadside Muntjac and a slightly bewildering detour around the bizarre 'village' of Eccles-by-the-Sea, we made our way inland, to Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Hickling Broad reserve and the view point at Stubb Mill.

Something of a local speciality is the little Chinese Water Deer, and one put in an appearance in the grazing marsh, before disappearing into the reeds. This Asian species was introduced to Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire in the late 19th century and to Whipsnade in 1930: individuals escaped (or were deliberately released) and the species is now well established in the Cambridgeshire Fens and Norfolk Broads, as well as areas around Bedfordshire. The English population probably numbers more than 2,000 individuals, and with the Asian populations now in decline, this is thought to represent around 10% of the world population.

As we walked further along the track, the sound of bugling Cranes could be heard out on the marsh, and George spotted them, a line of 15 birds flying across above an area of woodland and in to land, out of sight behind some tall reeds. Later another bugling pair flew behind the view point and a single bird flew, silently this time, across in front of us.

A trio of Common Cranes arrived at Horsey in the winter of 1979, with their first nesting attempt in 1981. Over the years, the population has grown, slowly at first but now helped by landscape-scale wetland creation projects across the country, and in recent years by the 'Great Crane Reintroduction Project' in Somerset, where the first 'wild' chicks were fledged in 2015. 2016 was a record year for Common Cranes in the UK, with the total population now numbering 160 individuals, with 14 chicks fledged from 48 pairs. An impressive conservation success story.

The other great attraction here is the harrier roost, and Marsh Harriers were on constant display from the moment we arrived, with at least 25 birds in the air together when we returned to the viewing platform, and more continued to arrive after this initial 'flock' had settled into their bushes for the night: probably well in excess of 40 harriers came past us, albeit mostly flying straight in to roost. A single male Hen Harrier also appeared, some way off, while a small falcon perched in a distant bush was probably a female Merlin, although at this distance and in the gloom it was impossible to be certain... not a bad first day.

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6th December 2017. Mid Yare Valley. Today we headed south east, to the Yare Valley and the Mid Yare National Nature Reserve, managed by the RSPB.

We started our day at Buckenham Marshes, where just after crossing the railway line those of us at the front of the group were delighted to watch a Stoat come bounding along the tracks towards us, before diving into the bramble-filled ditch from where, despite plenty of squeaking, we couldn't persuade him to re-emerge: a brief but wonderful sighting.

The grazing marshes appeared rather quiet compared to normal for this time of year, with many of the wintering flocks yet to build up. However, with a little looking, we managed to find enough to keep us entertained all morning. Reasonable numbers of Wigeon whistled on the pool at the end of the track, with a female Stonechat briefly perched up on a bush. A large flock of Lapwing flapped across from the pool to the grazing marshes, together with 6 Ruff who gave us all good views, showing off their remarkable unremarkable-ness.

We were here with geese in mind, and geese we found, starting with the three feral species resident here: Greylag, Canada and Barnacle Geese, the latter being joined by a single Barnacle X Snow Goose hybrid, a bird who has been resident in this group for many years now. Out in the distant, a large flock of Pink-footed Geese flew up in a great cloud over towards the sugar beet factory, and from a similar area came a group of slightly larger birds who flew closer, coming in to land close to the trees at the far side of the marshes, flashing their bright orange feet as they landed. For now, this group of 18 birds (joined by at least one White-fronted Goose) makes up the sum total of the country's wintering population of Taiga Bean Geese, and despite the distance and their liking for hiding amongst the longer rushes, they gave everyone at least a glimpse of their dark heads and long necks.

For lunch, we headed a little further up the valley, to Strumpshaw Fen, where Marsh Tit (as well as Coal, Blue and Great Tits), a confiding Jay and a very brief Nuthatch appeared on the bird feeders by the main reception hide, a mixed party of Siskin and Redpoll flew through the trees and out on the water a good number of Gadwall were feeding and displaying amongst the Coot, together with Teal, Mallard and Shoveler, while a handful of Marsh Harriers were constantly in sight, quartering over the reed beds.

We made our way round to Fen Hide, which can only be described as 'quiet', and then along the muddy riverbank path to the Tower Hide, which was equally bird-less, with a pair of Egyptian Geese flying in to join the four Coot, two Black-headed Gulls and four Mute Swans... Out over the reeds, Marsh Harriers continued to fly back and forth, one of which flushed a Snipe, with another briefly mobbing a rather handsomely marked Buzzard, perched up in a bush.

And so back to Reception Hide, where we settled in with hot chocolates, to wait for the entertainment to begin... and right on cue, at around 3.15pm, the Starlings arrived. First in just small numbers but soon massing into two enormous clouds of birds, which then funnelled down into the reeds, flock after flock after flock diving down into the noisy reedbed. They may not have put on much of an aerial display, but the sheer numbers were impressive, easily 50,000 and probably many more birds, noisily buzzing and chatting away as we quickly boarded the bus, ready to make the most of the last few minutes of daylight...

Back to the lane above the marshes, where we could hear 'some Jackdaws'... Looking east over the woods, great clouds of birds could be seen swirling above the trees, and as the light failed, more and more corvids (a mix of Jackdaws and Rooks) joined the swarm of birds over Buckenham Carr: tens and tens of thousands of birds in the air together, all calling and flapping, a terrific noise... and then, almost as one, they went down to roost: another 'wow' moment to remember.

One last treat, as a pair of Brown Hares loped across the field in the gloom as the light finally failed and we headed back down to the bus: time for home.

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7th December 2017. North Norfolk Coast. Our morning started with a short lesson in winter moth identification, with a lovely male December Moth on the front wall of the hotel, underneath one of the lights, and four Mottled Umber moths around another of the lights. Nearby we also found the remains of a Winter Moth caught in a spider web, completing a hat trick of all the likely moths to be on the wing at this chilly time of year. All the moths we saw were males: the December Moth male has large antennae, to catch the scent of the female's pheromones, while the females of both Winter Moth and Mottled Umber are flightless, virtually wing-less animals that crawl up onto tree trunks and wait for the males to find them.

Once aboard the bus, and with Storm Caroline gathering around us, we headed north, up to the coast and the famous Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve of Cley Marshes, the very first Wildlife Trust reserve, and still amongst the best. We started by heading straight to the beach car park, where a large group of Dark-bellied Brent Geese were grazing on the Eye Field and a big flock of Golden Plover were flushed up off the distant lagoons by a hunting Marsh Harrier. Off-shore a couple of Grey Seals were bobbing about amongst the waves, but with the wind really picking up and rain heading our way, we headed back inland a little way, to the visitor centre for some very welcome hot drinks and cake and a grandstand view of the rain whipping across the reserve.

After availing ourselves of the facilities (and warming up a bit after the icy blast at the beach), we walked out to the little cluster of hides overlooking Pat's Pool, where we found a good array of waders: four elegant Avocets, good numbers of Black-tailed Godwit and Dunlin, a handful of Redshank and Lapwing and a couple of distant Snipe. A single Little Egret chose to fly right towards the hide and land in front of us, while at least five Marsh Harriers quartered the reedbeds.

Two small birds flew up out of the grass in front of the hide and gave an unfamiliar call, and proved to be Water Pipits, taller and more cleanly patterned than the couple of streaky Meadow Pipits that joined them.

From here we continued westwards to Holkham National Nature Reserve, and Lady Anne's Drive, where another group of Brent Geese were grazing near to the drive. Scanning through revealed a rare visitor, a single Black Brant, a much more striking black and white bird with an obvious white flash down his side: Black Brant breeds in western Canada and Alaska and winters in Baja California, but every year a handful of birds turn up on the Norfolk coast in the flocks of Dark-bellied Brent Geese from Arctic Russia.

We walked through the pine woods where we found a mixed tit flock, made up of Long-tailed, Blue, Great and Coal Tits and a couple of Goldcrests, past a small pond with a trio of Little Grebes and a single female Tufted Duck, to the beach, where we had distant views of a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers out amongst the waves, and a big flock of Linnets flying around the saltmarsh. Some interesting plants on the beach included Carline Thistle, Sea Lavender and Sea Spurge.

With the clamour of geese heard beyond the trees, we returned to the Washington Hide overlooking the grazing marshes. From here we had great views of at least seven Marsh Harriers were patrolling the marsh, including yet another green wing-tagged bird, and a Common Buzzard was perched up in a hedgerow, watching the world go by. As dusk approached, at least five Muntjacs emerged to browse in the fields.

With an impressively dramatic sunset as a back drop, big flocks of thousand upon thousand of Pink-footed Geese began to arrive from inland, gathering noisily on the far side of the marshes. Just after the light gave out and we set off back to the bus, the entire clamouring flock lifted up and moved closer, while more skeins of geese continued to arrive overhead in the dark, as we got back to the bus: a very atmospheric end to another good day.

And so we headed back to Crostwick and our final dinner at the Old Rectory, complete with crackers and party hats...

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ENGLISH NAME	LATIN NAME	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		X	X	X	
Black Swan	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>			X		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		X	X	X	
(Russian) White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons albifrons</i>			X		
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		X	X	X	
Taiga Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>			X		
Barnacle X Snow Goose hybrid				X		
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			X		
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			X	X	
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta (bernicla) bernicla</i>				X	
Black Brant	<i>Branta (bernicla) nigricans</i>				X	
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		X	X	X	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		X	X	X	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		X	X	X	
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>			X	X	
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			X	X	
Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			X	X	
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			X	X	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>				X	
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		X			
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				X	
Family Phasianidae (Pheasants and Partridges)						
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		X	X	X	
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		X	X	X	
Family Gaviidae (Divers)						
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		X			
Family Podicipedidae (Grebes)						
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				X	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			X		
Family Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants)						
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		X	X	X	
Family Ardeidae (Hérons)						
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			X	X	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		X	X	X	
Family Accipitridae (Hawks and Eagles)						
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		X			
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		X	X	X	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			X	X	
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			X	X	
Family Falconidae (Falcons)						
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		X	X	X	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		X			
Family Rallidae (Rails and Crakes)						
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		X	X	X	
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			X	X	
Family Gruidae (Cranes)						
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		X			
Family Haematopidae (Oystercatchers)						
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				X	
Family Recurvirostridae (Avocets)						
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avoetta</i>				X	

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Family Scolopacidae (Sandpipers)						
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			X	X	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		X			
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		X			
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			X	X	
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>			X		
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				X	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				X	
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				X	
Family Charadriidae (Plovers)						
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				X	
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			X	X	
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			X	X	
Family Laridae (Gulls)						
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		X	X	X	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			X	X	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		X	X	X	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		X		X	
Family Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)						
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		X	X	X	
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		X	X	X	
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		X	X	X	
Family Strigidae (Owls)						
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				X	
Family Picidae (Woodpeckers)						
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		H			
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		X			
Family Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)						
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		X	X		
Family Alaudidae (Larks)						
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			X	X	
Family Motacillidae (Pipits and Wagtails)						
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		X	X	X	
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>				X	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			X	X	
Family Troglodytidae (Wrens)						
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		X	X	X	
Family Prunellidae (Accentors)						
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		X	X	X	
Family Muscicapidae (Flycatchers and Chats)						
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		X	X	X	
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		X	X		
Family Turdidae (Thrushes)						
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		X	X	X	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		X	X		
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		X	X		
Family Cettiidae (Bush Warblers)						
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H	H	
Family Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)						
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			X		
Family Regulidae (Crests)						
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		X	X	X	
Family Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)						
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		X	X	X	

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Family Paridae (Tits)						
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecilus palustris</i>			X		
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			X	X	
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		X	X	X	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		X	X	X	
Family Certhiidae (Treecreepers)						
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>			X	H	
Family Sittidae (Nuthatches)						
Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			X		
Family Corvidae (Crows)						
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		X	X	X	
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		X	X	X	
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		X	X	X	
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		X	X	X	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		X	X	X	
Family Sturnidae (Starlings)						
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		X	X	X	
Family Passeridae (Sparrows)						
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		X	X	X	
Family Fringillidae (Finches)						
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		X	X	X	
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		X		X	
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		X	X		
Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			X		
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>				X	
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Carduelis cabaret</i>		X	X		
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		H			
Family Emberizidae (Buntings)						
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		H	X	X	

LARGER MAMMALS		(S = tracks/signs, D = dead)				
Family Talpidae (Moles)						
Mole	<i>Talpa europaea</i>			S	S	
Family Sciuridae (Squirrels)						
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>			X	X	
Family Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares)						
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		S	S	X	
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>			X	D	
Family Phocidae (Seals)						
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		X		X	
Family Mustelidae (Mustelids)						
Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>			X		
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			S		
Family Cervidae (Deer)						
Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjac</i>		X		X	
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>		X	X		

MOTHS						
December Moth	<i>Poecilocampa populi</i>				X	
Winter Moth	<i>Operophtera brumata</i>				X	
Mottled Umber	<i>Erannis defoliaria</i>				X	

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Marsh Tit at Strumpshaw Fen (left), December Moth (top right) and Mottled Umber (bottom right), both at Crostwick, and Little Egret at Cley (below)

