

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



Norfolk 2020

- 1 7th Dec arrival, The Old Rectory, Crostwick
- 2 8th Dec **The Broads:** Horsey Gap, Stubb Mill (Hickling Broad NWT)
- 4 9th Dec **Mid-Yare Valley:** Buckenham Marshes and Strumpshaw Fen, Mid Yare NNR
- 3 10th Dec **North Norfolk:** Wiveton, Cley Marsh NWT Reserve, Holkham NNR
- 5 11th Dec depart



8th December 2020. The Broads. After our first night in the Old Rectory, and the first of several socially-distanced cooked breakfasts, we met up with our driver, Derek, and headed off through the fog along the winding lanes of East Norfolk to this morning's destination, the wonderfully empty beach car park at Horsey Gap.

As promised by the weather man, the skies cleared and by the time we were at the coast the fog had lifted, giving us clear views from the viewing point, at the top of the sand dunes, out over the beach, littered with the hulking shapes of hauled out 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; a handful of amorous couples, doing their best to ensure that there are even more seals next year; and everywhere white fluffy pups. This year's total count so far was of an amazing 1700 seal pups (up from 1400 in 2018 and 962 in 2017, the last two times we have visited the colony), the third most important breeding site on the English east coast (after Donna Nook and Lindisfarne). The UK is home to 40% of the world's Grey Seals, and an amazing 95% of the EU population.

A small pack of Sanderling were feeding frantically on the beach, running from the surf up through the massed ranks of seals to the base of the dunes, before flying back to the water's edge. Looking out to sea, we picked out a Razorbill and a couple of Guillemots bobbing about amongst the waves; a handful of Red-throated Divers were flying south, with one or two swimming in fairly close to shore; a young Shag was being harried by an ever-increasing gang of gulls; and an adult Gannet caught the sun as the final fog burned off.

After our fill of seal action, we struck inland towards the village of Horsey. A smart pair of Stonechats was feeding at the back of the dunes, perching up on the fence and the weedy vegetation for us all to see, with a Wren hopping about beneath them.

Out over the marshes, several large flocks of Pink-footed Geese were flying back and forth, yapping and dropping into the fields to the south. A trio of Roe Deer were feeding out in the fields. A harrier hunting over the grazing marshes was initially called as the expected Marsh Harrier, but it quickly became obvious this was something much more exciting: an adult male Hen Harrier, the 'grey ghost' that is increasingly difficult to find in the British countryside, thanks to the game shooting fraternity... This splendid bird had obviously survived the upland guns, and put on a great show as it quartered the rough grassland, before heading off to the south again.

Onwards, and we were pleased to find the pub at the end of the lane (with its precious 'facilities') open for business! With the sun doing a pretty good impersonation of being warm, we ate our picnic out in the pub garden, from where we could see a fourth Roe Deer and, more excitingly, a pair of Common Cranes on a far field.

Fed and watered, we made our way inland, to Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Hickling Broad reserve, and walked out across the grazing marshes again. Along the ditch, a trio of Little Egrets were feeding, with another on a nearby scrape, along with a handful of Grey Herons and a pair of Egyptian Geese.

Walking along one of the drains, we came upon the local herd of Konik ponies on their winter pastures: this Polish breed of horse is well suited to wetlands and is now used for conservation grazing on a number of large fenland nature reserves, including a number of sites across the Norfolk Broads.

Something of a local speciality is the little Chinese Water Deer, and we found one feeding out on the edge of the reeds on the grazing marsh. Another 2 or 3 animals were seen later from the viewing platform. This East Asian species was introduced to Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire in the late 19th century and to Whipnade in 1930: individuals escaped (or were deliberately released) and the species is now well established in the Cambridgeshire Fens and the wetlands of Norfolk and Suffolk, 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.

Towards the end of the track, while we were watching the Marsh Harriers gathering over their roost, a trio of Common Cranes flew across in front of us, bugling as they went, before settling down, out of sight, on their roost.

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. Cranes nested for the first time in Scotland in 2012 and Wales in 2016. The total UK population now numbers over 200 individuals, with 56 pairs nesting in 2019, and a record flock of 78 birds seen on the Nene Washes in October 2020: an impressive conservation success story indeed.

Back at the roost view point, a Barn Owl put in an appearance, hunting over the far fields before flying ever closer, and finally dropping into the grass just in front of us. After the Cranes, the great attraction here is the harrier roost, and Marsh Harriers were in the air the whole time from the moment we arrived at the viewpoint, albeit mostly quite distant in the increasingly misty conditions, and just arriving in ones and twos before disappearing into their roost site. At least 30 birds came in while we watched, but this year they didn't really put on much of a show.

Still, we were more than happy with our day's sightings, and walked back along the track to head back to the hotel.

9th December 2020. Mid Yare Valley. Today we headed south east, to the Yare Valley and the Mid Yare National Nature Reserve, managed by the RSPB.

The early morning rain had stopped, but the low cloud was still hanging over the countryside as we started our day at Buckenham Marshes, where the grazing marshes were barely visible through the murk. However, from the sound of things, there were plenty of birds out there: the whistling of Wigeon and Teal could be heard, even if we couldn't at first see the birds themselves.

Large numbers were on the pool at the end of the track, from where they were frequently flushed by the combination of the noise from the neighbouring pheasant shoot, and the attentions of at least four Marsh Harriers, looming out of the fog to scare the living daylights out of the ducks. Hundreds of Wigeon were out on the water, with smaller numbers of Shoveler asleep behind them and a single Shelduck, while we could hear the pattering noise of the Teal feeding in the shallows nearer to us.

Gradually the fog lifted a little, and we could see a bit further out on to the grazing marshes. Flocks of three species of feral geese, Greylag, Canada and Barnacle Geese, were all present, along with a near(ish) flock of Pink-footed Goose, with more off out in the near-invisible distance. Buckenham and Cantley Marshes were originally protected as the site of England's only regular wintering population of Taiga Bean Geese. Formerly numbering a couple of hundred birds in the 1980s and 90s, when the reserve was first purchased, this population has gradually diminished as time has gone on, arriving later, leaving earlier and coming in ever decreasing numbers. Last winter just 6 birds returned to Buckenham, and they have yet to put in an appearance this year... Although bad news for us, this isn't necessarily bad news for the geese themselves, as improved conditions on the continent, along with warmer winters, means they are doing well by staying on wintering grounds closer to their breeding sites in the Scandinavian taiga.

With visibility still pretty poor, we headed back to the railway station, from where we walked the short distance, through the woods, to nearby Strumpshaw Fen, passing a couple of Mistle Thrushes and a party of Long-tailed Tits along the way, along with Pheasants aplenty... We had our picnic overlooking the bird feeding station, where at least three smart Marsh Tits joined the more familiar Coal, Blue and Great Tits on the feeders, earning themselves the honorary title of bird of the day, for some.

On the main pool, a nervous group of Shoveler were feeding, being flushed every now and then by the quartering Marsh Harriers. As we were watching the ducks, and picking out the subtle Gadwall amongst

them, a Bittern put in an appearance, flying across the water before pitching down into the reeds, out of sight of course.

With no reports of the local otters yet this week, we made our way round to Fen Hide, passing by three Chinese Water Deer, after at least 6 more this morning, feeding out on the fen. The scene from Fen Hide was notably 'peaceful', but we could hear the pinging of Bearded Tits from the reeds, apparently all around us. Alas, aside from a single brief glimpse, we didn't get any sightings of these characterful reedbed residents, and after a while we gave it up as a bad job, and headed back to the visitor centre for a hot drink.

Here, as the light began to fade, a mini-murmuration of perhaps a hundred Starlings built up before diving into the reeds to roost, and just as we were about to leave we had a repeat sighting of a (the?) Bittern, flying up from some nearby reeds and heading off across the water.

Back to Buckenham, and to the little car park by the railway line, from where we headed up the lane above the marshes. In the nearby field we could already see a large number of crows: Jackdaws and Rooks, gathering for their roost. The numbers on the wires began to increase, ten here, ten there, before the larger flock on the field was disturbed by a passing dog walker, and began to swirl about, flying over us towards the woodland. Meanwhile, more birds were gathering on the wires, with thousands more beginning to fly in from all directions. What they lack in artistry, compared to the balletic patterns of Starling roosts, the crows made up for in noise and drama: great clouds of Jackdaws and Rooks, swirling above Buckenham Carr: thousands of birds in the air together, all calling and flapping, a terrific noise... and then, almost as one, with the last of the light, they went down to roost. A suitable end to another Norfolk day.

10th December 2020. North Norfolk Coast. This morning, a blue sky greeted us as we set off to the North Norfolk Coast. Making our way through the quiet lanes and scenic villages, we arrived at Wiveton, where a vagrant Lesser Yellowlegs had spent the last few weeks on a flooded field on the edge of the village. Alas, it seems he'd moved on to pastures new earlier in the week, but we had a pleasant walk through the village nevertheless, and found a single plant of Wild Clary *Salvia verbenaca* growing on the road verge.

Back on the bus, and we headed the short distance north, up to the coast and the famous Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve of Cley Marshes, the very first Wildlife Trust reserve. Unfortunately, the visitor centre was yet to re-open after the latest lockdown restrictions, so we weren't able to take advantage of the various cake opportunities, and instead we headed straight out onto the reserve, heading to the little cluster of hides overlooking Pat's Pool.

Out on fields towards the west, a flock of Brent Geese were grazing, along with plenty of Wigeon, while a Marsh Harrier quartered the fields in the background. Walking along the boardwalk through the reedbeds, we were surprised to flush a Water Rail from the side of the path, with a second bird creeping quietly (and mostly invisibly) through the reeds closer to the hides.

From the hides, the pools were surprisingly quiet, with small numbers of Teal, Wigeon, Shelduck and Lapwing pretty much all we could see.

Making our way back to the carpark, a Red Kite came soaring overhead, followed not long later by a Peregrine carrying its recently-caught prey.

From Cley, we continued westwards to Holkham National Nature Reserve, and Lady Anne's Drive, where we had our picnic while being watched by a young male Kestrel perched close by. Out on the marshes, a Red Kite was trying to steal a meal from a young gull feeding on some carrion, while both Buzzard and Marsh Harrier soared overhead and a Sparrowhawk came zipping across the marshes and snatched a small bird before flicking over us into the trees: a very raptory lunch break!

Walking out to the beach, we settled in to scan the sea. Sanderling and Oystercatcher were on the shore, with large numbers of Cormorants feeding and flying about offshore. Sea ducks included a quartet of Eider, several handsome pairs of Red-breasted Mergansers and a long line of Common Scoter flying about quite far out, with a single male asleep just offshore, close to where a Common Seal was bobbing up. A single Slavonian Grebe was nice to see, with a handful of Great Crested Grebes further out.

Walking along the dunes, we found leaf rosettes of orchids, perhaps Autumn Lady's-tresses, with some long-finished seed-heads of Marsh Helleborines not far away. Onwards, along the back of the dunes and through the pine woods, we headed back towards the Washington Hide, overlooking the grazing marshes.

As the light began to fade, several groups of Starlings started to arrive, coming in to roost in the reedbed in front of us. They were all very keen to get to bed, with none of the atmospheric 'murmuring' that we might have hoped for, although a couple of Marsh Harriers did their best to flush them up.

Out on the marshes, the first flocks of Pink-footed Geese began to fly in, small groups of birds coming in from the south west, with maybe a couple of hundred birds dropping in to the marshes. However, it seemed that the vast majority of Norfolk's geese had a different plan for the evening: looking out to the south east, we could see an enormous cloud of birds, a long line of skein after skein, tens of thousands of birds, smoking its way across the horizon. They had seemingly gathered together out on the day's foraging fields way off inland, and instead of gathering together on the grazing marshes here they headed directly towards their roost site, offshore. A little disappointed to miss out on the spectacle, but still impressed by the vast numbers obviously present, we headed back to the bus through the gathering dusk, for the drive back home.



Norfolk 2020 Trip Report

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th
Family Anatidae (Swans, geese and ducks)						
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		X	X	X	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		X	X	X	
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		X	X	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	
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			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	X	
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		X	X	X	
Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				X	
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</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	
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	
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>				X	
Family Sulidae (Gannets)						
Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		X			
Family Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants)						
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		X	X	X	
Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		X			
Family Ardeidae (Hérons)						
Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>			X		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		X			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		X	X	X	
Family Accipitridae (Hawks and Eagles)						
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1			
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		30	X	X	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		X	X	X	
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		X	X	X	
Family Falconidae (Falcons)						
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			X	X	
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				X	
Family Rallidae (Rails and Crakes)						
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			H	X	
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		X	X	X	
Family Gruidae (Cranes)						
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		11			
Family Haematopidae (Oystercatchers)						
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				X	
Family Scolopacidae (Sandpipers)						
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		X		X	
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		X	X	X	
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				X	

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Family Charadriidae (Plovers)						
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			X		
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		X	X	X	
Family Laridae (Gulls)						
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		X	X	X	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		X	X	X	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		X	X	X	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		X		X	
Family Alcidae (Auks)						
Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		X			
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		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		
Family Tytonidae (Barn Owls)						
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		X			
Family Picidae (Woodpeckers)						
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			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	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		X	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 Muscipidae (Flycatchers and Chats)						
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		X	X	X	
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		X	X	X	
Family Turdidae (Thrushes)						
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		X	X	X	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			X		
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>				X	
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		X	X	X	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			X	X	
Family Regulidae (Crests)						
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				X	
Family Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)						
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		X	X	X	
Family Panuridae (Bearded Tit)						
Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		H	H	H	
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 Corvidae (Crows)						
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		X	X	X	
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			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	

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Family Sturnidae (Starlings)						
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		X	X	X	
Family Fringillidae (Finches)						
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		X	X	X	
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				X	
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		X		X	
Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			X		
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>				X	
Family Emberizidae (Buntings)						
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			X	X	

ENGLISH NAME	LATIN NAME	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th
LARGER MAMMALS						
Family Sciuridae (Squirrels)						
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>				X	
Family Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares)						
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		X	X	X	
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>			X		
Family Phocidae (Seals)						
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		X		X	
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				X	
Family Cervidae (Deer)						
Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjac</i>				X	
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>		4	10		
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		4			

