

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



NORFOLK

6th to 11th December 2021



A gallery of photos from the trip is at
www.flickr.com/photos/wildlifetravel/albums/72157720249328552

Day One: 6th December. Arrival in Norfolk.

Following our respective journeys to Crostwick, in the heart of Norfolk's Broadland district, we gathered for an introduction to the holiday and our first meal together.

Day Two: 7th December. Horsey Gap and Hickling Broad.

We travelled eastwards this morning, to the beach at Horsey. Reaching the top of the Marram Grass-clad slope, the chorus of wails drifting around us revealed itself as a colony of Grey Seals, strewn along the shore. Among the waves, large bulls contemplated a fight, while females and pups relaxed higher up the beach, and a small group of Sanderling scuttled between waves and seals.

The most recent count by the Friends of Horsey Seals had totalled more than 1,100 pups, of which over 700 had been born that week. This gave us a perfect opportunity to see a range of pups, from the newborns in their soft white coats, to older pups in the process of growing their adult waterproofing. The seals began to breed here in 2003 and the colony has been steadily building ever since. Horsey is considered to be the third most important breeding site on the English east coast (after Donna Nook and Lindisfarne) with the UK home to 40% of the world's Grey Seals, and an amazing 95% of the EU population.

With seal pups, and their mothers liberally scattered among the dunes, our walk involved several diversions, including around one vocal and slightly irate three-week old that had taken up residence in a large puddle, and was resisting the attempts of a volunteer to encourage it back to the beach.

Passing through the grazing marsh behind the beach we spotted a lone Stonechat, before our attention was drawn to a herd of Red Deer wandering past. Groups of Pink-footed Geese, dropped into the fields as we walked, always keeping a watchful eye on us. After a quick coffee stop, with three Roe Deer feeding in a nearby field, we travelled a short way inland to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Hickling Broad.

With the wind picking up as Storm Barra progressed east, it was a brisk walk through the reserve. On the open water hundreds of Teal were joined by Greylag Geese, a handful of Gadwall, Shelduck and Shoveler. A solitary Snipe hunkered down on a mudbar with a more energised Dunlin occasionally darting in to view. Lapwing swirled nervously as Marsh Harriers patrolled overhead, and as we progressed deeper in to the reserve we spotted some of the resident Konik Ponies, seemingly oblivious to the gusts. A Great White Egret flew in to join a Grey Heron among the reeds, and after a few purposeful strides, took off again. After passing the Grade II listed Stubb Mill, we reached the viewpoint watching over the marshes, home to dozens of roosting Marsh Harriers. Their numbers were slowly building as we waited, as was the wind and the rain, helping us make the decision to return to the bus for a hot chocolate to warm us for the journey back to the hotel.

Day Three: 8th December. Buckenham Marshes and Strumpshaw Fen.

Today we set out south-east, to the Yare Valley. Our first stop was Buckenham Marshes, on the northern bank of the River Yare. Crossing the railway line and in to the reserve, we spotted a small group of Goldfinch and a single Siskin occupying one of the windswept shrubs alongside the track. Out on the marsh two Chinese Water Deer curled up among the rushes were betrayed by their large "teddy-bear" ears. This East 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 the wetlands of Norfolk and Suffolk, as well as the 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 progressed along the track we could hear the whistles of Wigeon and Teal, with both present in large numbers, most of which appeared to be asleep! There were plenty of geese here too, with the feral species Canada Goose, Greylag Goose and Barnacle Goose all present, along with a scattering of Pink-footed Geese. Setting out along the river we eventually spotted the species we were most hoping to see: Taiga Bean Geese, out in the far reaches of the marsh. 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 1990s, when the reserve was first purchased, this population has gradually diminished, with the birds arriving later and leaving earlier in ever decreasing numbers as the geese increasingly stay on wintering grounds closer to their breeding sites in the cold Scandinavian forest (taiga).

We returned towards Buckenham station past still-snoozing ducks, with distant clouds of Golden Plover swirling around the chimney of the Cantley Sugar Factory. From here, it was a short walk through the woodland to the nearby reserve of Strumpshaw Fen. The feeding station gave us the opportunity to catch up with some of the smaller birds, as a stream of Blue Tits and Great Tits swooped in for provisions, interspersed with handsome Marsh Tits, and the occasional Chaffinch and Coal Tit.

On the main pool all was quiet, beside a pair of Mallard and a lonely-looking Teal, so we set out through the woodland for the Fen Hide, in the middle of the reserve. The wind was lively again this afternoon, and the smaller birds were few and far between. As we neared the hide a Cetti's Warbler scolded loudly from the reeds, all the while managing to remain completely unseen. The view from Fen Hide rivalled that of the main pool, with a pair of preening Mute Swans, which occasionally exchanged soft snorts, the only sign of life. As we watched over the wetland landscape, little changed, save an occasional Marsh Harrier flapping by. Eventually our patience was (briefly) rewarded: the Mute Swans taking on a new alertness, as an Otter paddled across the reed-fringed water in front of us. It was a blink and you missed it sighting, but good to catch up with one of Norfolk's most charismatic mammals. After a quick look over the River Yare, we retraced our path to the visitor centre, picking up the pinging calls of Bearded Tits, along with a couple of Muntjac tiptoeing their way through the woods along the way.

Another early winter evening, another roost to visit: this time it was the turn of the Buckenham corvid roost. Returning to Buckenham in the fading light, we staked out an area of open farmland above the marshes. A couple of Brown Hares bounded through the half light, but all seemed quiet on the corvid front with just a few Jackdaws milling around. As we waited, small groups of Jackdaws and Rooks began to drift in from several directions, gathering in trees and on wires. Small groups turned into large aggregations, with the birds now starting to settle on Buckenham Marsh, the sound of their chatter growing. These gatherings are thought to act as information centres, where individuals can swap tales of the day's antics, most importantly, where they found food. With more birds arriving, there were now many tens of thousands of chattering corvids. As the gloom

intensified, the birds took to the skies again, as the whole swirling mass funnelled into their roost in the trees of Buckenham Carr, a truly spectacular sight.

Day Four: 9th December. Cley Marshes and Holkham.

We headed north to the coast today, to meet James at Cley Marshes. Cley is Norfolk Wildlife Trust's oldest nature reserve: purchased in 1926, it swelled to more than 300 hectares following the purchase of additional land in 2012.

Walking out along the raised sea wall of the East Bank gave us a perfect view out across the expanse of reedbed and grazing marsh around us. A Kingfisher briefly perched alongside Don's Pool before zooming off in a flash of blue. Out on the marshes crowds of Wigeon were feeding alongside Teal, and there were plenty of waders to be spotted on the saltmarsh with Curlew, Redshank, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Grey Plover and a single Golden Plover hopefully probing the mud. As we approached the shingle ridge, the group of Snow Buntings overwintering in the area made several passes, and we counted a total of 46 as they roamed around the beach, stopping occasionally to pick through the shingle. Looking east we managed to locate the Iceland Gull that had been commuting between the remains of several unfortunate seals dotted along the beach.

Returning along the East Bank, a hopeful scan along the main drain was rewarded as the second Otter of the trip bobbed up in the channel. We spent some time watching it paddle, relaxed, to and fro across the channel; a trail of bubbles revealing its underwater progress. A quick photo opportunity with a Muntjac close to the path and then it was time for a well-earned coffee and cake in the visitor centre, before the short drive west to Holkham National Nature Reserve.

Along the way, a Cattle Egret tailing grazing cows gave us a full-house of egrets for the day. The fields either side of Lady Anne's Drive at Holkham were lined with various ducks, geese and waders, and a small group of Grey Partridge put in a brief appearance. Following the trail to the beach, we found a pair of interesting fungi in the sand dunes: Sea Buckthorn Bracket *Fomitiporia hippophaeicola*, growing on a mature Sea Buckthorn *Hippophae rhamnoides*, and Dune Waxcap *Hygrocybe conicoides*, slightly past its crimson best.

We turned our attention to another winter visitor that had been spotted in the area, and after a quick scan James found four Shore Larks shuffling around a small area of saltmarsh. From the Shore Larks it was a short walk to the beach. Whilst not so close at hand, there was plenty to see out at sea, with Common Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Great Northern Diver, Slavonian Grebe, Great Crested Grebe and Eider all riding the waves. With sunset drawing closer, we retreated towards the pine woods, headed for Washington Hide, which overlooks the grazing marshes.

As the sun set in a colourful sky, groups of Cormorants, Jackdaws and Starlings shuttled past to their various roosting sites. Pink-footed Geese began to appear from the west, dropping into the marsh below, with small flocks transitioning into long yapping skeins. With some light still on our side it was back to the bus, and just as we got settled in our seats the geese unleashed their finale, the air briefly thick as many more appeared to make a mass final descent to the marsh.

Day Five: 10th December. Snettisham and Titchwell.

We made our way back north, spotting Pink-footed Geese, Brown Hares, Muntjac and Cattle Egrets in the fields as we passed, before reaching the RSPB reserve at Snettisham, tucked alongside The Wash, on Norfolk's north-west coast. Snettisham is known for its wader "spectaculars", when the highest spring tides cover the entirety of the mud in The Wash, forcing hundreds of thousands of waders into the skies. Unfortunately our visit coincided with a rather lower high tide, and a keen wind, and we had to appreciate the vast numbers of birds more distantly. Furthest out in the bay were the Knot, shuffling away from the incoming tide with groups occasionally rising up into a smokey murmuration. Last winter the number of Knot peaked at an estimated 140,000. Closer to shore there were plenty of Dunlin and Oystercatchers, with groups of Golden Plover and Teal keeping themselves to themselves, whilst the Shelduck were scattered far and wide.

Getting our fill of the invigorating wind, we headed back to the car park, spotting Linnets, Greenfinch, Redwing and Fieldfare along the way, before continuing on our journey to Titchwell Marsh, on the north coast. After lunch at the visitor centre, watching Blackbirds, Wrens and Robin scuttling around a wood pile we took to the reserve.

From the Island Hide, the light was at its best to appreciate the colours of the many Lapwing, Teal and Wigeon, along with a glistening mass of Golden Plover. A few Black-tailed Godwits were busy working the mud, whilst a handful of Avocets seemed content to sleep away the afternoon. Continuing to the Parrinder Hide, the birds were a lot closer, but the light less forgiving for photos. We quickly spotted one of the reserve's rarer winter visitors: a dumpy Purple Sandpiper, patrolling a mud bar close to the hide. A large group of Brent Geese parachuted into the marsh, seemingly for a cleanup before travelling back to their feeding grounds.

We headed down to the shoreline, where there were plenty of gulls, joined by Oystercatchers, Grey Plover and Bar-tailed Godwits, before getting ourselves in position, looking over the reedbed, ahead of sunset. The reedbed at Titchwell is home to a harrier roost, used by around 16 Marsh Harriers, with two to three Hen Harriers also using the area. A chilly evening was drawing in, but our perseverance rewarded us with around ten Marsh Harrier dropping into the reeds, along with two ringtail Hen Harriers on the saltmarsh, one of which gave a close flyby. A Water Rail was squealing from deep in the reeds and two Bitterns made brief appearances as they flew low between reed thickets. With night fallen it was time to head back for our last night in Crostwick, and (probably) our first Christmas dinner of the year.

Laurie Jackson and Philip Precey, Wildlife Travel. December 2021

Norfolk 2021: trip report and species lists

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th
Family Anatidae (Swans, geese and ducks)							
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Taiga Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>			◆			
Barnacle Goose	<i>Anser leucopsis</i>			◆			
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			◆		◆	
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla bernicla</i>				◆	◆	
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		◆	◆	◆		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				◆	◆	
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				◆		
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		◆		◆		
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				◆		
Family Phasianidae (Pheasants and Partridges)							
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>			◆	◆		
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			◆	◆		
Family Gaviidae (Divers)							
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>				◆		
Family Podicipedidae (Grebes)							
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				◆	◆	
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>				◆		
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				◆		
Family Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants)							
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Ardeidae (Hérons)							
Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>					◆	
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				◆	◆	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		◆		◆	◆	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Accipitridae (Hawks and Eagles)							
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					◆	
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	

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Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				◆	◆	
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				◆		
Family Falconidae (Falcons)							
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Rallidae (Rails and Crakes)							
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>				H	H	
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			◆	◆	◆	
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					◆	
Family Haematopidae (Oystercatchers)							
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				◆	◆	
Family Recurvirostridae (Avocets)							
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>					◆	
Family Scolopacidae (Sandpipers)							
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		◆		◆	◆	
Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					◆	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		◆		◆	◆	
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>					◆	
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		◆		◆		
Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>					◆	
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				◆	◆	
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>					◆	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				◆	◆	
Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>				◆	◆	
Family Charadriidae (Plovers)							
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				◆	◆	
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				◆	◆	
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				◆	◆	
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Laridae (Gulls)							
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		◆		◆	◆	
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>				◆		
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		◆		◆	◆	
Family Alcidae (Auks)							
Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				◆		
Family Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)							
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Stock Dove	<i>Columa oenas</i>		◆				
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		◆		◆		

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Family Strigidae (Owls)							
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				H		
Family Picidae (Woodpeckers)							
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			◆			
Family Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)							
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		◆		◆		
Family Alaudidae (Larks)							
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				◆	◆	
Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>				◆		
Family Motacillidae (Pipits and Wagtails)							
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		◆		◆	◆	
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Troglodytidae (Wrens)							
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Prunellidae (Accentors)							
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Muscicapidae (Flycatchers and Chats)							
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		◆				
Family Turdidae (Thrushes)							
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			◆		◆	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			◆		◆	
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>					◆	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			◆	◆	◆	
Family Cettiidae (Cetti's Warblers)							
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			H	H		
Family Regulidae (Crests)							
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			◆	◆		
Family Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)							
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		◆	◆	◆		
Family Panuridae (Bearded Tit)							
Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			H			
Family Paridae (Tits)							
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecilus palustris</i>			◆			
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			◆	◆		
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		◆	◆			
Family Corvidae (Crows)							
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		◆	◆	◆		
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	

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Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Sturnidae (Starlings)							
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Family Passeridae (Sparrows)							
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				H	◆	
Family Fringillidae (Finches)							
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		◆	◆		◆	
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>					◆	
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			◆		◆	
Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			◆			
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		◆			◆	
Family Emberizidae (Buntings)							
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				H	◆	
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				◆		

MAMMALS							
Rodents							
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>					◆	
Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>			◆	◆	◆	
Lagamorphs							
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					◆	
Brown Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	
Carnivores							
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		◆		◆	D	
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			◆	◆		
Ungulates							
Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>					◆	
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		◆				
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		◆		◆		
Chinese Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>			◆	◆		
Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjac</i>		◆	◆	◆	◆	

LEPIDOPTERA - MOTHS			
Common Bagworm	<i>Psyche casta</i>	Holkham	
December Moth	<i>Poecolocampa populi</i>	Hotel	
Winter Moth	<i>Operophtera brumata</i>	Hotel	
Mottled Umber	<i>Erannis defoliaria</i>	Hotel	
FUNGI			
Sea Buckthorn Bracket Fungus	<i>Fomitiporia hippophaeicola</i>	Holkham	
Dune Waxcap	<i>Hygrocybe conicoides</i>	Holkham	



Top left: Wigeon, Holkham Marshes. Top right: Roe Deer, Horsey
Bottom left: December Moth (top) and Mottled Umber (bottom).
Bottom right: Black-tailed Godwit, Holkham