WILDLIFE TRAVEL



#	DATE	LOCATIONS AND NOTES
1	7 th December	Arrival in Norfolk.
2	8 th December	Fakenham, Titchwell and Holkham.
3	9 th December	Horsey Gap, Rollesby Broad and Hickling Broad.
4	10 th December	St Benet's Abbey, Strumpshaw Fen and Buckenham.
5	11 th December	Depart.

Leaders

Jono Leadley James Lowen Yorkshire Norfolk

A gallery of photos from the trip is at https://www.flickr.com/photos/wildlifetravel/albums/72177720313551520/with/53414480794/

All photos: James Lowen.

Day One: 7th December. Arrival in Norfolk.

Follow our respective journeys into Crostwick, on the edge of Norfolk's Broadland, we gathered for an introduction to the holiday, before adjourning for a delicious three-course dinner.

Day Two: 8th December. Fakenham, Titchwell and Holkham.

Heading north-west from our base near Norwich towards the RSPB reserve at Titchwell, leader Jono was in regular contact with co-leader James, who was busy trying to track down a special set of birds to start us off. As we approached the town of Fakenham, James alerted Jono that he had succeeded, and so the minibus pulled into the incongruous surroundings of a car park for a national hardware chain.

To our great delight, our telescopes and binoculars were soon trained on a group of six Waxwings. These 'pink punks' are vaguely Starling-shaped berry-raiders from Scandinavia. This winter is the beneficiary of a large irruption of this spectacular species, and we were hopeful to encounter some during the holiday. But to start the whole trip with them was beyond our dreams. "I hope we haven't peaked too soon," quipped one of our party.

Fortunately we hadn't, as our morning destination evidenced. Arriving at RSPB Titchwell, the skies had cleared to a gorgeous blue and the wintry sun shone surprisingly brightly. After a quick introduction from James as to how the RSPB has managed the reserve in the face of rising sea levels, we soon picked out Siskins among the Goldfinches feeding in Alders, and spotted a Coal Tit darting into the bird feeders.

Making our way north along the main path, a pair of Bearded Tits revealed their presence with their distinctive twanging call. Jono spotted a distant 'ringtail' Hen Harrier that, pleasingly, came closer, giving great views. The first of several Marsh Harriers followed soon after, enabling us to compare their different shapes. Pointing out willows that had established themselves in the reedbed, Jono explained to us the importance of dynamically managing reedbeds if the conservation aim is to help reedbed specialities rather than allow succession to a drier, 'carr' woodland habitat.

The freshmarsh held a variety of ducks (Shoveler, Wigeon, Teal and Pintail) plus some waders (Dunlin and Golden Plover) and a few small groups of Brent Geese. As we walked past the tidal areas, we had good looks at Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Bar-tailed Godwit, Curlew and Grey Plover, while a Little Egret, interestingly, had been marked with a colour ring. Who had put that on the bird and where?

Upon arrival at the beach, a flock of Linnet greeted us cheerfully. Here, Sanderling and Bar-tailed Godwits joined Oystercatchers on the expanse of sand. Beyond these shorebirds, the tide was high and that meant that a spectacular group of Common Scoter was building relatively close offshore. Although viewing was tricky in the swell, the bright sunlight enabled us to get good views of the flock, which easily numbered a thousand, and we picked out several Velvet Scoter and a single Long-tailed Duck in their midst.

A gentle stroll back along the main path was followed by a sandwich lunch, complemented by some welcome hot drinks from the RSPB café. Then it was onwards to our afternoon destination, via a wonderfully confiding flock of Brent Geese near Burnham Overy Staithe on the coast road.

We reached Holkham National Nature Reserve, where we were quickly on to a Great White Egret. This species now breeds at Holkham, thanks to sensitive, conservation-focused management from the dedicated team of wardens. The damp fields either side of Lady Anne's Drive were thronged with Wigeon, Teal and Shoveler, and we soon picked out Redshank and Ruff picking their way through the ducks' midst.

Making our way onto the beach at Holkham Gap, we headed east towards a roped-off area that has been 'set aside' for the benefit of Shorelarks (here at their most regular UK wintering site) and Snow Buntings. As we approached, a flock of what looked like larks flew up and then disappeared. We never did track them down, but made amends with a group of 18 gorgeous Snow Buntings - flickering like snowflakes on the wintry sea lavender.

All the while, we had been aware that Pink-footed Geese were arriving on the grazing marshes by the thousand - earlier than expected. As we regained Lady Anne's Drive, it was evident that more were arriving. From the path by a pool frequented by Little Grebe and other waterbirds, we enjoyed good views of a flock of 'Pink-feet' grazing in a field. Returning to Lady Anne's Drive as the light faded, we were treated to the jaw-dropping spectacle and soundscape of countless thousands more Pink-feet dropping into the roost on the grazing marshes. Earlier in the week, 51,000 had been counted across the entire Holkham estate. We could well believe it! After a day that started with pink punks and finished with pink-feet, we made our way back to the hotel very happy, and looking forward to another three-course dinner.



Above: Waxwing.



Top to bottom: Hen Harrier; Wigeon; Brent Geese.



Top to bottom: Snow Buntings; Pink-footed Geese.

Day Three: 9th December. Horsey Gap, Rollesby Broad and Hickling Broad.

After breakfast - cooked for some, continental for others - we made our way outside towards the coach. James was already perusing the white-painted front wall of the hotel, to which lights had attracted quite a suite of moths during last night's mild conditions. Single Winter Moth and November Moth were beaten by three large, triangular Mottled Umber. But even these leafy-looking delights were eclipsed by a veritable herd of 17 December Moth, swarthy beauties that - when regarded front on - somehow look like musk oxen. A fine start to the day, even before departure!

We took the scenic route to the coast, checking fields for possible geese, cranes and swans. A group of swans near Ingham appeared all to be Mute, but both Bewick's and Whooper had been seen here in recent weeks. Reaching Horsey Gap, we descended from the coach in abject weather. The rain was very heavy, and the winds very strong and cold. But none of this bothered the creatures we hoped to see: Grey Seals.

Briefed and guided by volunteers from the Friends of Horsey Seals community group, particularly Mick, we learnt reams about both the species and colony while watching bulls divide up the beach, pups suckling from mothers, females seeking to evade the attention of males, mock-aggressive interactions between immatures, youngsters moulting and - saddest of all - a clearly emaciated pup that had been abandoned by its mother.

The colony, we were told, started here in 1981, with the first breeding a few seasons later. It is effectively overspill from the Blakeney Point colony on Norfolk's north coast, which has reached carrying capacity. Although the colony is centred on Horsey, it now stretches along the beach for five miles north and south. Each year the number of adults and pups increases; so far, 3,224 pups had been born this season, and the season's trajectory means the colony is likely to again break its own record, and see over 4,000 pups born. Sadly, birth rate isn't the be-all and end-all of the colony. A fortnight ago, Mick said, Horsey lost 700 pups during a tidal surge that resulted from combined strong winds and high water.

This life-and-death scenario rather put into perspective the discomfort we were experiencing from the elements. Nevertheless, we quit while we were ahead. Rather than completing the full intended walk south then inland via the Nelson Head track, we returned to the car park and met the minibus. A flying Common Crane was spotted by a lucky few at the back of the bus as we made our way back to main road - a taste of what we hoped was to come.

We then drove to Rollesby Broad, where we dried out and warmed up with a coffee (and the odd scone) before checking this inland waterbody. Sadly, the Smew that were present a week or two ago were absent, but we noted two Tufted Duck and a Great Crested Grebe. A calling Redwing pricked our ears as we reboarded the minibus and headed for our afternoon destination. En route we gawped at the extent of flooding around the River Thurne at Potter Heigham, with large areas of pasture completely inundated, now home to ducks and Mute Swans rather than the normal cattle.

After lunch and a spot of retail therapy in the visitor centre at Hickling Broad Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve, we set out on our walk east past Brendan's Marsh. Shoveler and Teal attracted attention on the Marsh, whose water levels were vastly higher than our last visit here on the Wildlife Travel June

tour. A Reeve's Muntjac scurried past, Grey Squirrel extended the non-native mammal list, and a male Yellowhammer sat up, bright and proud, on a hedge that flanked a sunflower field.

The rain, fortunately, had cleared, which meant that Marsh Harriers had returned to the air. This raised hopes that our destination, the raptor roost at Stubb Mill, would provide some exciting sightings. And so it proved. Scanning the area upon arrival, we picked up a nice group of Marsh Harrier perching high up in dead birches, well clear of the sodden vegetation below. Two Common Buzzard, a Kestrel and a Sparrowhawk were seen in similar positions. A ringtail Hen Harrier - the second of our trip for this rare raptor - gave good views as it flapped steadily across our field of view.

More Marsh Harriers were quartering around, while the distant horizon was thronged with flocks of Pink-footed Geese. Nearer to us, Jays flew by, and a group of Lapwing flopped overhead. Excitingly, we picked up two adult Common Crane feeding relatively close to us. Although initially obscured behind two hawthorn bushes, these imposing birds soon strode into unimpeded view, allowing us to watch them through binoculars and telescope. An evident pair, the birds even began calling - neck outstretched and head up. What a wonderful experience.

This would have been highlight enough, but to our surprise a group of ten Greater White-fronted Geese then dropped into an adjacent field. This wasn't a species that we had expected to see here, bringing smiles to plenty of faces. Close scrutiny suggested that just two were adults, raising the possibility that this was actually a family party. If so, the adults must surely win a Goose Parents of the Year Award!

Our return to the visitor centre was accompanied by the setting sun - in blissfully dry skies. Reaching the hotel, several December Moths were already in attendance under the lights, prompting a few photographs to be taken before we shed our boots and outer layers, and made our way inside to enjoy a much-deserved dinner.



Top to bottom: December Moth; Grey Seal; Common Crane.

Day Four: 10th December. St Benet's Abbey, Strumpshaw Fen and Buckenham.

Today dawned dry, which was a relief after yesterday's difficult weather. Driving east, we made for St Benet's Abbey, an area of grazing marsh leading south to the River Bure and the eponymous abbey, which - among many events in a varied history - was the scene of a riot in 1381.

Walking south along the paved entrance track, we quickly spotted one of our target species, Chinese Water Deer. Although this marsh-loving species is not native to the UK, our country now harbours roughly a tenth of the population of this globally threatened mammal - arguably suggesting that we might have an obligation to conserve it. We admired the deer for a while, noting its differences from the similarly non-native Reeve's Muntjac, until a Kingfisher caught our eye, perched on a Greater Reedmace along a narrow channel. Despite its vivid coloration, it proved difficult to see after it tucked itself in among reeds.

Walking onwards, we spotted a Bewick's Swan with some Mutes, and a flock of Lapwing had secreted a couple of Common Snipe in their midst. Onwards we walked, increasingly hopeful that a dry morning after yesterday's wetness would mean that our main quarry was active.

Within minutes we were proved right, with a Short-eared Owl seen briefly. Soon, however, Shorteared Owls seemed to be all over the place - hunting at close range, perched on bushes or in repose on the ground, gliding towards us with yellow eyes staring intently, and even interacting, with two birds hassling one another, one of them calling angrily, something that none of us had heard on wintering grounds. "It's behind you," someone quipped, mindful that we were already in pantomime season. Thrillingly, a minimum of seven owls showed brilliantly for a prolonged period and then - as suddenly as they had arrived - disappeared.

We took that as our cue to depart so walked back northwards to rejoin the minibus, finally adding Dunnock to the holiday list en route. After a comfort break nearby at Ludham Bridge, we made our way to RSPB Strumpshaw Fen, where we ate our sandwiches at Reception hide, hoping that one of the resident Otters might swim in front of us. Sadly, the water spirit did not grace us with its presence, and we made do with watching the frenetic comings and goings at the bird feeders. Marsh Tit, Coal Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker were all greatly appreciated.

Wandering through the woodland, noting the odd Marsh Harrier on the way, and hearing a Treecreeper call, we just about made it to Fen Hide before the afternoon rains began. This caused one female Marsh Harrier that had been sat up in a tree protruding from the reedbed to treat us to a close fly-by before she gently lowered herself into the reedbed, to wait out the squall.

Heading back to Reception hide, we were treated to a briefing by warden Matt about the challenges involved in managing Strumpshaw Fen. These centred around water quality (Strumpshaw lies downriver of pollution emanating from Norwich) and water salinity (high tides are an increasing problem, and will doubtless be ever more so due to climate change). He also explained why managing the reedbed was so important. Suitably informed, we returned to the minibus and headed down the Yare to the neighbouring RSPB reserve of Buckenham.

En route we came across a field of sugar beet that was crammed with Pink-footed Geese - thousands of them! Onwards we continued to Buckenham. Crossing the railway line from the car park, most of us walked south as far as the riverbank. We counted 20 vampire-fanged Chinese Water Deer on the marshes - December is always a great month to see them - and there were plenty of Wigeon and Teal flocks winging around each time a Marsh Harrier flew over. Jono shouted out 'get on this raptor!'; three of us had brief views of a first-year female Goshawk which took us quite by surprise until we learned that the same bird had been seen at Strumpshaw a week previously - a reserve first.

Walking back north towards the railway line, we took up a vantage point that we hoped would enable us to have a ringside seat at the finale of our holiday - the winter mass roost of Jackdaws and Rooks that Mark Cocker wrote about in his book *Crow Country*. This is one of the Britain's most spectacular wildlife sights, and one that is very much a Buckenham exclusive.

At first it seemed as if it would be a no-show. The sky was thickening, and only a few hundred corvids were dribbling in towards the trees at Buckenham Carr. Somewhere over to the south of the River Yare, however, we could here the cawing of thousands of corvids: might they come over our way?

All of a sudden, the sky filled with black forms heading south towards us - but these were too big to be Jackdaws. The accompanying calls swiftly revealed their identity: these were the thousands of Pink-footed Geese that we had earlier watched on fields towards Strumpshaw. As the geese whiffled down, *wink-wink*ing all the way, our excitement mounted. But still the corvids wouldn't come in.

Just when we thought it was too late, they arrived. And how! Countless thousands clouded north from the River Yare, filling our binocular view with their forms. They swirled hither and thither, teasing the treetops with their presence and calling all the while. It was truly mesmerising.

And just when we thought it couldn't get better, driver Keith - attracted out of the minibus to see what all the wildlife fuss was about - spotted a ghost drift past in front of us. A Barn Owl that proceeded to quarter along the path away from us - our 107th and final bird species of the trip, and a very fitting culmination to a wonderful holiday in wintry Norfolk. With the skies fully black, it was time to return to the hotel, for our final log of the tour, final dinner of the tour, discussion of the trip highlights and holiday quiz... with a copy of James's latest book as prize!

Day 5: 11th December. Departure.

After a final breakfast - whether cereal or something more substantial to fuel our journeys home - we said our goodbyes, packed our bags, and left the hotel - full of smiles and memories of countless crows, innumerable geese, calling cranes, pink punks and seal pups. How fabulous Norfolk is!

Jono Leadley and James Lowen, Wildlife Travel, December 2023.



Above: Short-eared Owl; Great Spotted Woodpecker; Chinese Water Deer.



Top to bottom: Pink-footed Geese; corvid roost.

NORFOLK 2023: some highlights

BIRDS

This checklist follows the taxonomy published in the HBW and BirdLife International Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of the World, as updated by *www.birdsoftheworld.org*

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	5
Family Anatidae (Swans, ge	eese and ducks)					
Greylag Goose	Anser anser		Х	Х	Х	
White-fronted Goose	Anser albifrons			Х		
Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus		Х	Х	Х	
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	Branta bernicla bernicla		Х			
Canada Goose	Branta canadensis		Х		Х	
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor			Х	Х	
Bewick's Swan	Cygnus columbianus				Х	
Egyptian Goose	Alopochen aegyptiaca		Х		Х	
Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna		Х	Х	Х	
Shoveler	Spatula clypeata		Х	Х	Х	
Gadwall	Mareca strepera		Х	Х	Х	
Wigeon	Mareca penelope		Х	Х	Х	
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		Х	Х	Х	
Pintail	Anas acuta		Х			
Teal	Anas crecca		Х	Х	Х	
Pochard	Aythya ferina		Х			
Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula		Х	Х		
Velvet Scoter	Melanitta fusca		Х			
Common Scoter	Melanitta nigra		Х			
Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis		Х			
Family Phasianidae (Pheas	ants and Partridges)					
Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus		Х	Х	Х	
Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		Х		Х	
Family Podicipedidae (Grel	pes)					
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		Х			
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus			Х		
Family Columbidae (Pigeor	ns and Doves)					
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	Columba livia				Х	
Stock Dove	Columa oenas		Х		Х	
Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus		Х	Х	Х	
Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		Х		Х	
Family Rallidae (Rails)						
Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		Х	Х	Х	
Coot	Fulica atra		Х	Х		

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	ļ
Family Gruidae (Cranes)						
Common Crane	Grus grus			Х		
Family Haematopidae (Oy	-					
Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus		Х			
Family Charadriidae (Plov	ers)					
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola		Х			
Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria		Х			
Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		Х	Х	Х	
Family Scolopacidae (San	dpipers)					
Curlew	Numenius arquata		Х			
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica		Х			
Snipe	Gallinago gallinago		Х	Х	Х	
Redshank	Tringa totanus		Х			
Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus		Х			
Turnstone	Arenaria interpres		Х	Х		
Knot	Calidris canutus		Х			
Ruff	Calidris pugnax		Х			
Sanderling	Calidris alba		Х			
Dunlin	Calidris alpina		Х			
Family Laridae (Gulls)						
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus		Х	Х	Х	
Common Gull	Larus canus		Х	Х	Х	
Herring Gull	Larus argentatus		Х	Х	Х	
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus			Х		
Family Phalacrocoracidae	(Cormorants)					
Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		Х	Х	Х	
Family Ardeidae (Herons)						
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta		Х	Х	Х	
Great White Egret	Ardea alba		Х		Х	
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		Х	Х	Х	
Family Accipitridae (Hawk	s and Eagles)					
Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		Х	Х	Х	
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus		Х	Х		
Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus			Х		
Goshawk	Accipter gentilis				Х	
Red Kite	Milvus milvus		Х			
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		Х	Х	Х	
Family Tytonidae (Barn O	wls)					
Barn Owl	Tyto alba				Х	
Family Strigidae (Owls						
Short-eared Owl	Asio flammeus				Х	

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	5
Family Alcedinidae (Kir						
Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		Х		Х	
Family Picidae (Woodp						
Great Spotted Woodp			Х		Х	
Family Falconidae (Fal						
Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		Х	Х	Х	
Merlin	Falco columbarius		Х			
Family Corvidae (Crow						
Jay	Garrulus glandarius		Х	Х	Х	
Magpie	Pica pica		Х	Х	Х	
Jackdaw	Corvus monedula		Х	Х	Х	
Rook	Corvus frugilegus		Х	Х	Х	
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone		Х	Х	Х	
Family Paridae (Tits)			_			
Coal Tit	Periparus ater		Х		Х	
Marsh Tit	Poecilus palustris				Х	
Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		Х	Х	Х	
Great Tit	Parus major		Х	Х	Х	
Family Alaudidae (Lark	ss)					
Skylark	Alauda arvensis		Х		Х	
Family Panuridae (Ree	dlings)					
Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus		Х			
Family Cettidae (Bush	Warblers)		_			
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti				Х	
Family Aegithalidae (Lo	ong-tailed Tits)					
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus		Х	Х	Х	
Family Regulidae (Cres	sts)					
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus		Х	Х	Х	
Family Certhiidae (Tree	ecreepers)					
Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris				Х	
Family Troglodytidae (Wrens)					
Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		Х	Х	Х	
Family Sturnidae (Starl	lings)					
Starling	Sturnus vulgaris		Х	Х	Х	
Family Turdidae (Thrus	shes)					
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		Х			
Redwing	Turdus iliacus		Х	Х		
Blackbird	Turdus merula		Х	Х	Х	
Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris				Х	
Family Muscicapidae (-					
Robin	Erithacus rubecula		Х	Х	Х	
Stonechat	Saxicola torquata		Х			
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ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	5
Family Bombycillidae	(Waxwings)					
Waxwing	Bombycilla garrulus		Х			
Family Prunellidae (Ac	ccentors)					
Dunnock	Prunella modularis				Х	
Family Motacillidae (P	ipits and Wagtails)					
Pied Wagtail	Motacilla alba yarrellii		Х			
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis		Х		Х	
Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus		Х			
Family Fringillidae (Fir	iches)					
Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		Х	Х	Х	
Greenfinch	Chloris chloris			Х		
Linnet	Linaria cannabina		Х		Х	
Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		Х	Х	Х	
Siskin	Spinus spinus		Х			
Family Emberizidae (B	untings)					
Snow Bunting	Plectrophenax nivalis		Х			
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citronella			Х		
Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus		Х		Х	

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	1	2	3	4	5
MAMMALS		-				
Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus			Х		
Chinese Water Deer	Hydropotes inermis				Х	
Reeve's Muntjac	Muntiacus reevesi			Х	Х	
Grey Squirrel	Sciurus carolinensis		Х	Х	Х	
Fallow Deer	Dama dama		Х			
MISCELLANY						
December Moth	Peocolocampa populi		Х	Х		
Winter Moth	Operophtera brumata		Х	Х		
Mottled Umber	Erannis defoliaria		Х	Х	Х	
November Moth	Epirrita dilutata		Х			