

Norfolk & Suffolk - 6th to 10th November 2014

INTRODUCTION

No birding year would be complete without a few days in East Anglia. Although the main migration period was over we knew there would still be some stragglers and we were anticipating finding lots of newly arrived winter visitors to the UK's shores. In the main we weren't disappointed and had a great time, but winter migrants were in short supply, having seemingly been held up by the mild autumn weather, both here and on the continent.



We based ourselves in King's Lynn and Lowestoft for two nights each, having managed to book some cheap nights at the respective Premier Inns.

DIARY

6th November

Just as we were leaving home a flock of c200 Fieldfare flew over the house: seemed like a good omen! With daylight at a premium we went straight to [RSPB Frampton Marsh](#), where we arrived c13.00 hrs. There was some sunshine, with high cloud and a moderate south-westerly wind, which freshened as we walked around the reserve.



We walked from the visitor centre towards the Sea Bank which protects the south east boundary of the reserve. The [Glossy Ibis](#), which had been present at Frampton for the last five months, was very obliging as it fed around the roadside pools. There must have been over 2000 Dark-bellied Brent Geese on and around the reserve, plus a lone Barnacle and 3 Pinkfeet, as well as sizeable flocks of Canada & [Greylag](#). Good numbers of Teal & [Wigeon](#) were also present along with 3 Pintail and the usual flocks of

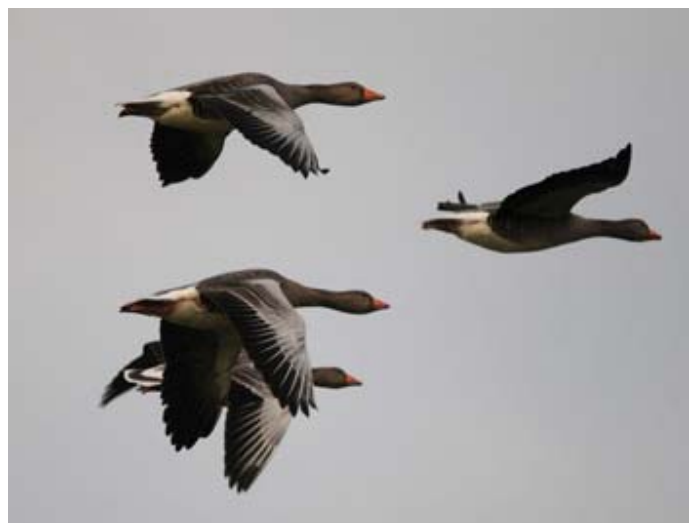
Mallard & Shoveler. We walked around the Sea Bank towards the East Hide hoping to spot the *Lapland Bunting* which had been seen earlier in the day, but we were out of luck. With the wind strengthening we visited both the Reed bed and the 360° Hides before returning to the Visitor centre for a welcome cup of coffee.

Other species seen included:- Little Egret (c6) Common Snipe (4), Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit(c50), Dunlin (c30), Golden Plover (c20), Ruff (c10), Lapwing (c60), Meadow Pipit, Skylark, Curlew and a hunting Peregrine, which soon brought chaos to an otherwise peaceful scene. Anyone planning to visit Frampton should visit the [website](#) to get an idea of what's about as comprehensive weekly records are regularly updated.

7th November

After a leisurely breakfast we arrived at **Lady Anne's Drive** at **Holkham** a little before 10.30 expecting to see the surrounding fields full of Pinkfeet and *Greater White-fronted Geese*. Doesn't matter what you expect when out birding; it doesn't just make it happen. The mild weather appeared to have held up migrating flocks on the continent and at their breeding grounds: even winter thrushes were conspicuous by their absence. Several skeins of Pinkfeet flew overhead, looking as though they had come in off the sea, but apart from a few Wood Pigeon and 6 Egyptian Goose the fields were empty. A quartering Marsh Harrier flew over the distant reedbeds and as we walked through the pines towards the beach we spotted 3 Goldcrest, Coal Tit and 2 Jay. Surveying the salt marsh from the viewing platform at Holkham Gap we saw a flock of c50 Dark-bellied Brent Goose and a flighty, but always distant, flock of c20 Snow Bunting.

We walked through the salt marsh and out on to the beach beyond the dunes to have a good look at the scoter flock strung out in a line just off-shore. As the tide was almost fully out this involved quite a hike, but recent regular sightings of a *Surf Scoter* promised to make it all worthwhile. The day had started cloudy, but with a strengthening wind, we were



left with high clouds and intermittent bursts of sunshine. We examined the scoters for well over an hour, but with nothing to show other than c200 Common

Scoter, several Velvet Scoter, c5 Red-throated Diver and the occasional lone Guillemot. With only one scope between us, Amanda had a few fleeting glimpses of a *Surf Scoter*, but each time I looked in the scope there was no sign. Just as we were about to call it quits and leave a group of six other birders shouted excitedly. The sun had just come out revealing the splendid white head patch and bright yellow bill of a male Surf Scoter: we retraced our steps and sure enough were both able to enjoy prolonged views of the bird as it bobbed along on the waves, in the midst of the scoter flock.

At c12.30 we moved on to a spot on the main road overlooking **Burnham Overy Dunes** in the hope of seeing the two *Rough-legged Buzzard* that had been frequenting the area for several days. There were 4 Common Buzzard in the fields and on the fence posts and sizeable flocks of Dark-bellied Brent Geese and Pinkfoot plus a couple of quartering Marsh Harrier, but no sign of the RLB.

We moved on to [Titchwell Marsh](#) and with the wind continuing to strengthen we spent most of our time viewing from the Parrinder Hide: we had already spent nearly 90 minutes sea watching at Holkham so we didn't fancy going down to the beach in the high wind. Birds seen here included:- 5 Marsh Harrier (including 2 males), the usual collection of ducks & geese, Avocet (c10), Knot (c4), a single Grey Plover, a few Ruff and Common Snipe, Little Egret and a fleeting Grey Phalarope which landed on the water for all of 10 seconds before taking flight again, not to be re-located. The bird had been seen several times earlier but had now disappeared for the day. Again, the RSPB [website](#) has daily updated sightings.

8th November

After two nights in King's Lynn we were moving on today so we decided to get on the road straight after breakfast and head to **Choseley Drying Barns** to have a look at some different habitat. The day had started bright and sunny but clouded over later with the wind remaining quite strong. A little inland, farmland birds were much more common and amongst others, we saw:- Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting, Reed Bunting, Red-legged Partridge, Skylark, Long-tailed Tit and a dashing Merlin. We also saw our first Hare running along the skyline.

Next we moved on to the spot on the A149 overlooking **Burnham Overy Dunes** to try once again for *Rough-legged Buzzard*. A couple were watching four buzzards, in their scope, in the fields and they pointed out two pale-headed birds they were positive were Rough-legged, having supposedly seen them in flight; we watched the birds for 20 minutes and saw them in flight several times but were unable to spot any relevant identifying characteristics. They were dark all over on their backs and their under-wings displayed normal

Common Buzzard features. No luck once again! We saw similar species we had picked up here yesterday, including c10 playful Skylark chasing each other around the fields.

Onwards..... we stopped at **Cley** next. Not much had been seen on the main body of the reserve; all action appeared to be on the east and west banks or the sea. We therefore decided to walk the east bank in search of a *Water Pipit* that had been seen earlier. No luck with the pipit, but we did see:- Curlew, Dunlin (c6), Ruff (2) and Little Egret before eventually spotting a Long-tailed Duck at the back of Arnold's Marsh. Up on the top of the shingle bank we watched the sea for a while, spotting a lone Sandwich Tern, Red-throated Diver, Gannet and Common Gull.

Finally we arrived at **Hickling Broad** at c 14.45 hrs and walked out to the **Stubb Mill** raptor watchpoint. The reed bed was alive with harriers: there were at least 10 Marsh Harrier (including several males) and a single ring-tailed Hen Harrier. After about 30 minutes we heard cranes calling and shortly thereafter two pairs of Common Crane flew across the tops of the trees towards the reed bed, followed about 20 minutes later by another pair. As we walked back to the car park we saw 2 Fieldfare as well as a Muntjac, Chinese Water Deer and Hare. We moved on to Lowestoft for the night.

9th November

Dawn brought steady rain and conditions which were far from ideal for birding. After breakfast we went to the Links Road car park to try for the *Desert Wheatear* which had been seen near Ness Point, Lowestoft for several days previously. I walked the sea wall for 10 minutes, along with several other hopeful birders, but there was no sign of the wheatear and I returned absolutely soaked, to the car where Amanda sat dry and in comfort. We then set off for [Minsmere](#) in the hope the weather would improve; luckily, by the time we arrived, the rain had stopped, the clouds parted and the sun came out.

We set off for the East Hide, via the North Hide where we saw Common Snipe, a few ducks and a sizeable flock of Starling feeding in the bushes and in the short grass. As we left the hide we spotted a single Redwing foraging in the middle of a large hawthorn and a little further on we heard a Cetti's Warbler's unmistakable call (the third of the morning so far), and then watched the bird as it called and chased a Wren in what appeared to be a territorial dispute over a small willow. A male Stonechat was the only other bird of note as we continued around the reserve. From the East Hide we saw the usual array of ducks plus a few Pintail, Curlew, 3 Common Snipe, a single Turnstone and c6 Avocet. With the trail being flooded beyond the sluice after a heavy bout of overnight rain

combined with a high tide, we retraced our steps to the Visitor Centre for a spot of lunch.

Refreshed, we set off for the Island Mere Hide along the muddy woodland trail: we heard both Green & Great Spotted Woodpecker calling, but with daylight at a premium, we decided not to stop and search for the birds. There were a few ducks and Cormorant on the mere and a Great White Egret perched at the edge of the reeds. After about 30 minutes I spotted an Otter at the back of the mere and we watched it for



about 10 minutes as it fished almost continuously, only briefly surfacing for air. It was by now a beautiful, bright, sunny November evening so we retraced our steps and visited the Bittern Hide. We must have been in there for at least 90 minutes without any hint of a *Bittern*, but after about 20 minutes the hide began to fill up and we were surrounded by closely packed bodies. It became obvious they had all turned up to watch the anticipated 'murmuration' of Starlings and, as we were hemmed in, we decided to continue our vigil.

With the continuing bright sunlight it was at least an hour before the flocks of Starling began to appear and join forces until at least 20,000 birds twisted and gyrated over the reed bed, finally settling down for the night. Their progress was hindered by c3 quartering Marsh Harrier, a Sparrowhawk, a dashing Merlin and a flight of 6 Bewick's Swan circled overhead before splitting into two groups of three and heading for the Scrape and Island Mere respectively. It was almost dark by the time we escaped from the hide and made our way back to the car park and onwards to Lowestoft.



10th November

With the weather much improved from yesterday morning we returned to **Ness Point, Lowestoft** to search for the male *Desert Wheatear* and the long staying *Red-backed Shrike* (which had been a regular since early September) in the area around the wind turbine on the edge of the small industrial estate. Sadly, despite spending well over an hour combing the entire site, we didn't find either



bird and when we looked at Bird News on the Birdguides website later, it appears both birds had left overnight as a result of the calm, clear weather. Either that or the local Peregrine (or indeed cat), was no longer going hungry! We did, however, see two spanking winter plumaged [Mediterranean Gulls](#) in the Links Road car park together with a flock of c20 Black-headed Gulls. Indeed, a local birder advised us

that sightings of Med Gulls were quite commonplace here with up to 14 birds having been seen recently as they came to bathe in the numerous rainwater puddles in the car park along with the BHG flock. We also saw a Black Redstart around the compound which surrounds the wind turbine and a lone Turnstone on the roof of one of the industrial units amongst flocks of gulls and starlings.

A female [Desert Wheatear](#) had also been present for a similar period, further north along the coast at **Gorleston-on-Sea**, near Great Yarmouth. As we were heading in that direction on our way home, it seemed natural to make that our next port of call and we duly found the bird on the esplanade (along with several other birders all sporting long lenses rather than bins and a tripod). The wheatear didn't seem at all bothered by all the attention it was receiving as it worked its way up and down the esplanade, the adjoining embankment and beach, looking for insects and even having a go at a late, passing, Red Admiral.



As we returned to the car park we could see several people looking intently at our vehicle. We had been away for all of 30 minutes: in that time a campervan had attempted to park next to us and had left a nice deep scratch on the side bumper and wheel arch of our 3 month old car. Fortunately, the owner was one of the people in the group and he had stayed behind to give us his personal details - what a gent!

We moved on to the Asda car park in Great Yarmouth to visit **Breydon Water** where a *Rough-legged Buzzard* had been seen for several days. There were no other birders about and after about 30 minutes we gave it up as a lost cause. You may think a bit of a theme is emerging here; despite our best efforts and quite a bit of time spent, we had missed RLB at two separate sites and nearly two weeks later, as I am writing this report, the birds are still being seen at both sites. We did see Curlew, Golden Plover (c500), Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Knot, Lapwing, lots of Wigeon, Shelduck, several Cormorant, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Kestrel, Common Buzzard and the almost obligatory Peregrine giving nearly all of the above a hard time.

As WWT **Welney** was loosely on our way home and a *Rough-legged Buzzard* (surprise, surprise!) had been seen there during the previous few days we decided to make one last attempt. It was nearing 15.30 hrs when we arrived and although it was a bright sunny day, dusk was fast approaching, so realistically we didn't have much chance of success. Not surprisingly, we didn't see the RLB (which is also still being seen there). We did, however, see the usual array of ducks and geese, including our first Pochard of the trip, numerous Whooper Swan and 4 Bewick's, plus several more flying overhead in the gathering gloom as the birds left the surrounding fields to return to the relative safety of the reserve for the night. As we walked back to the visitor centre from the Lyle Hide we had one final treat in store as a Barn Owl flew through a gap in the bushes and down the path in front of us before disappearing over the embankment to the seasonally flooded land beyond. With it went the last of the light and it was finally time to head for home.

CONCLUSION

We didn't chase birds, unless they were on our planned route of course, and during our four nights away we managed to see 97 species (plus another 2 which were only heard). Despite our disappointment with the *Rough-legged Buzzards*, the other birds (some of which we hadn't seen for a few years), more than compensated and we had an excellent short break in Norfolk and Suffolk.



[Bird Species List](#)

David & Amanda Mason