



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT NORFOLK BRECKS & COAST 12TH – 15TH 2019

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WEDNESDAY 13TH MARCH – *Gale force winds and showers, 10C*

A difficult day of weather saw us start and finish the day strongly, but largely struggle in between. We knew it was going to be tough with winds forecast to be gusting in excess of 50mph, and they were not wrong about that. We initially thought we might chance our arm on the coast, but took a last minute decision to head first to Sculthorpe Moor reserve, in the hope that they would not shut the reserve due to high winds until after they had chance to get around and check things out! We got in with a warning that they might be closing soon, but that gave us chance to try for the **Coues's Arctic Redpoll** which has been frequenting the feeders on and off for several weeks. As soon as we arrived at the birds favoured spot, we could see a couple of redpolls at the feeder, though they were one each of Lesser and **Mealy Redpoll**. Within a minute though, the **Arctic Redpoll** had appeared and gave us several minutes of excellent views feeding at the niger. Its unstreaked band of white through the rump, small, fine and pointed bill, padded plumage, pale ground colour and white undertails with single faint central streak all provided good pointers to its identification – not a traditional 'snowball' this one, but a nice bird nonetheless. The bird soon headed back off to the tall poplar trees and we were left with only Siskins at the feeders, though we did pick up Great-spotted Woodpecker, Treecreeper and Chiffchaff around to bolster our list. Wandering down to Whitley Hide, the wind was ferocious but we managed good views of **Brambling**, **Bullfinch**, Reed Bunting and **Marsh Tit** at the feeders, and a **Red Kite** cruised by. Hastening back to the portacabin feeders, we had further excellent views of Lesser and **Mealy Redpolls**, before the reserve closed and we had to leave – we had made a good choice to come here early!



Coues's Arctic Redpoll – great views at the feeders at Sculthorpe today

What to do next in the biblical winds? Well, we figured we had at least a chance of connecting with **Goshawk** in the north brecks, so we headed south of Swaffham to our favoured raptor watchpoint. A 45 minute vigil produced plenty of Common Buzzards, and more views of Red Kites, but only very distant views of a male **Goshawk** gliding effortlessly on the strong wind, its cross-bow silhouette and full, rounded tail being obvious features despite the distance. It circled for a few minutes, disappearing over the trees having not flapped its wings once – not the views we were hoping for, but something. We went on next to check a number of rolled maize strips in the surrounding area hoping for an early Stone Curlew, but we couldn't find any, so retired to Mundford for a welcome stop for coffee and lunch.

After lunch the wind really took a grip on our day, so we decided to take a chance and drive south a bit more to try for Stone Curlew at Cavenham Heath, where we knew they had already been sighted this spring. Sadly though, the wind was just too much, and we could barely use a scope, never mind spot a Stone Curlew. We gave up, and beat our retreat to Lynford where we would end the day in the relative shelter of the arboretum. **Bramblings** were plentiful here, and we added a few Redwing, **Marsh Tit** and another pair of Great-spotted Woodpecker. Down at the paddocks, we found five **Hawfinches**, perching atop the conifers of their roosting spot despite the wind. Two flew down lower into the deciduous trees bordering the paddock, giving us much better views, and salvaging something from a difficult afternoon. Wandering back up, we saw another **Hawfinch** in the arboretum larches, and were very surprised to find fourteen **Yellowhammers** by the feeding ride, perched among the blackthorn blossom with several smart Bramblings. A nice way to end a challenging day.

THURSDAY 14TH MARCH – *Sunshine and 50mph westerly winds, 13C*

The forecast had suggested that the wind might be a bit lighter today, but in fact, it was worse! We planned to spend the whole day on the coast, starting at Holkham where we hoped Lady Anne's Drive would stay open (much like Sculthorpe they are quick to close in high winds due to public safety concerns). We parked on the drive, and battled our way out of the vehicle – this was going to be tough going! Large numbers of wildfowl were on the freshwater flashes here, with big flocks of Wigeon, Shoveler and Brent Geese in particular. We didn't linger here too long though, and instead headed into the shelter of Holkham Meals. Walking through the woods it actually felt surprisingly spring like out of the worst of the wind and in the sun – we logged three singing Chiffchaffs along the walk to crosstracks, and from the hide we enjoyed some of the first signs of spring on the marshes. The **Spoonbills** are already back to business, and we enjoyed watching their comings and goings. We saw at least five different birds, including a splendid adult in full breeding plumage on one of the pools. The highlight though, was watching one battling in against the wind carrying a small branch of about three metres in length! The bird eventually had to give up and drop its bounty! We counted seventeen **Russian White-fronted Geese** on the marsh, among the various Greylags, two Bar-headed Geese and a few Pink-feet. Two **Great White Egrets** were seen resting against the reeds out of the wind, and the pools were also liberally scattered with Teal and a pair of Avocets. **Red Kites** hardly get a mention in our reports these days, being almost as frequent as the numerous Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier sightings we enjoy in this part of Norfolk – we saw several kites today though, hanging on the wind and often already cruising round in pairs. Leaving the hide, we made our way back east through the meals, enjoying a surprise pair of **Common Crossbills** which were perched in the pines close to the track before flying off calling.

After coffee, we braced ourselves for a sortie out into the bay to look for the **Shorelarks**. It was going to be windy! Thankfully though the light was now superb, and the birds performed for us. We found the **Shorelarks** bustling among the Sea Lavender out in the bay, but keeping low and hard to spot. We could count nine, until they flew up with the wind behind them and headed out to the cordon, when we were able to count the usual eleven. We accepted this as a good result given the weather, and beat a hasty retreat to the shelter of the van. Thornham Harbour was next stop, and here it was so windy we could really only just about stand up. Our quarry of the wintering **Twite** flock seemed unlikely to materialise, but we managed to scan the outer harbour with the sun behind us and at least add a nice selection of waders – Ringed Plover, Knot, Dunlin, Sanderling, Turnstone and Grey Plover. Three **Red-breasted Merganser** were in the channel, and eight **Common Eider** could be seen hauled out on a mud bank towards Thornham Point. As we battled our way back to the van, the **Twite** flock bounced in and dived into the saltmarsh grasses out of view. We saw them again flying around at close range, but views on the deck were never on the cards today – the birds just didn't want to sit in the open (and who could blame them!). A **Peregrine** blazed through the harbour scattering the wildfowl, so all in all, we had done pretty well.

After lunch we arrived at Titchwell, where we would spend the rest of the afternoon. A male **Brambling** was at the feeders and of course the faithful **Water Rail** was in the ditch as usual. As we

walked down the main path, we could see large numbers of Brent Geese really close to Island Hide, so we dived in there first of all. Two **Red Crested Pochards** were also on view from here, and we found the **Water Pipit** creeping along the reedy fringe of the freshmarsh. Water levels are still very high on the reserve, but a few waders were still managing the find some suitable areas around the small islets – several Knot, two **Black-tailed Godwits** and a few **Avocets** being the best of it. From Parrinder, we had better views of the bustling gull colony, which is just starting to get into full swing for the breeding season. We counted at least sixty **Mediterranean Gulls** here, looking absolutely stunning in the spring sunshine. Marsh Harriers playing on the wind, and more great views of the Brent Goose flock, rounded off our visit nicely. On our way back to the car park, we decided to have a quick check around the Fen Trail in case we could find a **Woodcock** skulking under the bushes. After some time scanning carefully, we found our quarry – a superb **Woodcock** feeding quietly among mossy branches and newly sprouting nettles deep under the willows. We had some fantastic views through the scope of this popular bird.



Woodcock – typical views through the branches at Titchwell this afternoon!

Heading back towards base, we spent the final hour of daylight looking for owls. We saw no less than four different **Barn Owls**, including fantastic close views of one perched on a post at a field edge, watching the grassy margin intently for prey. We couldn't find a Little Owl, but added Stock Dove and **Grey Wagtail** to the trip list and headed home feeling pretty happy with the days haul considering the weather!

FRIDAY 15TH MARCH – *40mph Westerly winds and showers*

We returned to the brecks today, leaving early with bacon butties in order to give ourselves the best possible chance of connecting with the ever-elusive **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**. It was really windy again, so we didn't fancy our chances, but were more than willing to give it a crack! Heading down along the river bank path, finches were very much in evidence and were a feature throughout the whole day – **Siskins** and **Chaffinches** were constantly heading over, with smaller numbers of **Bramblings** and **Redpolls** too. Soon, we were stopped in our tracks by the distinctive 'ki-ki-ki' call of a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**, and it sounded really close by. The usual tense moments of scanning followed, as we tried to track down the call. The bird flew out from a big tree, crossing the river and landing in view just in front of us. What happened next was quite unprecedented – we first had the female calling and feeding in the treetops for ten minutes, and then the male appeared and called behind us. He replaced the female, showing for an even longer period as he worked away on the high

branches of the alders. We left the bird, continuing further down the river to look for other species, but we heard another **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** calling much further down and had another twenty minutes of continuous views of the foraging female! The male then reappeared (or possibly a second male) and the two flew back over the river, indulging in much aggressive chasing and calling right in front of us. We didn't think this was mating behaviour, and seemed more like a territorial dispute between a rival pair. At one point, they had hold of one another and tumbled down out of the trees almost to ground level no more than 5m away from us! It was quite a remarkable showing, and one of the best we have ever had of the species. We knew we couldn't top that with anything, so made our way back out for a coffee break!



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – some of our best ever views today

Woodlark was next on the agenda, and we visited a favoured ride where a pair has been showing pretty well recently. Unfortunately we got caught in a heavy squall and had to take shelter, but soon after a **Woodlark** appeared, singing briefly above us before perching in the pines and giving some nice scope views. All the time, more **Siskins**, **Redpolls**, **Bramblings** and **Chaffinches** were piling out of the pines – clearly a spring exodus of these species was taking place at the moment. Earlier in the tour, we had managed some pretty poor views of **Goshawks**, so before lunch, we wanted to return to our favoured watchpoint to try again. We were in luck this time, as two birds were on show as we arrived. Both males, one was clearly adult, while the other was a brown, streaky second year bird. Both charged around over the treetops in pursuit of one another, with slow, deep wingbeats. The adult male reminded us of the display flight of a **Nightjar** at times! The feud ended with the adult returning to the pines, while the young bird flew low across the field in front of us – so close we could see it had a bulging full crop! With that one put to bed, we made a welcome stop for lunch, before heading back into the forest for the end of the day.

Lynford is a key spot in the brecks in early spring, and we wanted to head back to try again in particular for **Crossbills** which we had missed previously. A **Firecrest** showed really well just a round the car park, flitting among the bare branches of a deciduous tree and occasionally pausing to sing and flash its bright crest. By the feeders, we really enjoyed watching dapper **Bramblings** foraging

alongside a stunning group of Yellowhammers – a real surprise to see these farmland buntings feeding here and the first time we have ever seen the species at the site. While we were scoping the finches and buntings, we heard the penetrating ‘tick’ call of a **Hawfinch** from just in the trees above us. Repositioning, we could see a fine male **Hawfinch** singing from the top of the trees, and soon the female appeared next to him and the two sat together in the sunshine – excellent! Down by the bridge, we had a careful look for a roosting **Tawny Owl** which Jason had found recently, and today it was sitting well in the open and showing well – for a roosting owl! Finally, down at Lynford Water, we enjoyed a pair of **Mandarin** flying around calling (we had seen six at the woodpecker site earlier too!) -we never did see nor hear any crossbills, but we had enjoyed a really excellent afternoons birding to round off our trip.

Systematic List

1. Brent Goose
2. Canada Goose
3. Greylag Goose
4. Pink-footed Goose
5. Russian White-fronted Goose
6. Egyptian Goose
7. Mute Swan
8. Shelduck
9. Shoveler
10. Gadwall
11. Wigeon
12. Mallard
13. Teal
14. Mandarin
15. Tufted Duck
16. Common Pochard
17. Red Crested Pochard
18. Eider
19. Red-breasted Merganser
20. Red-legged Partridge
21. Pheasant
22. Little Grebe
23. Great Crested Grebe
24. Grey Heron
25. Great White Egret
26. Little Egret
27. Eurasian Spoonbill
28. Great Cormorant
29. Sparrowhawk
30. Goshawk
31. Marsh Harrier
32. Red Kite
33. Buzzard
34. Water Rail
35. Moorhen
36. Coot
37. Oystercatcher
38. Avocet
39. Lapwing
40. Golden Plover
41. Grey Plover
42. Ringed Plover
43. Curlew
44. Black-tailed Godwit
45. Turnstone
46. Knot
47. Sanderling
48. Dunlin

49. Woodcock
50. Redshank
51. Black-headed Gull
52. Common Gull
53. Mediterranean Gull
54. Great Black-backed Gull
55. Herring Gull
56. Lesser Black-backed Gull
57. Stock Dove
58. Woodpigeon
59. Collared Dove
60. Barn Owl
61. Tawny Owl
62. Great-spotted Woodpecker
63. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
64. Common Kingfisher
65. Kestrel
66. Peregrine
67. Jay
68. Magpie
69. Jackdaw
70. Rook
71. Carrion Crow
72. Coal Tit
73. Blue Tit
74. Great Tit
75. Marsh Tit
76. Treecreeper
77. Nuthatch
78. Skylark
79. Shorelark
80. Woodlark
81. Long-tailed Tit
82. Common Chiffchaff
83. Goldcrest
84. Firecrest
85. Wren
86. Starling
87. Blackbird
88. Song Thrush
89. Fieldfare
90. Redwing
91. Mistle Thrush
92. Robin
93. Common Stonechat
94. House Sparrow
95. Dunnock
96. Pied Wagtail
97. Grey Wagtail
98. Meadow Pipit
99. Rock Pipit
100. Water Pipit
101. Chaffinch
102. Brambling
103. Bullfinch
104. Hawfinch
105. Common Crossbill
106. Greenfinch
107. Twite
108. Linnet
109. Goldfinch

- 110. Eurasian Siskin
- 111. Lesser Redpoll
- 112. Mealy Redpoll
- 113. Coues's Arctic Redpoll
- 114. Yellowhammer
- 115. Reed Bunting