



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT

NORFOLK BRECKS & COAST
18TH – 21ST MARCH 2019

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TUESDAY 19TH MARCH – *Calm overcast day, 15C*

A magnificent days birding today saw us head down into Breckland to look for the many speciality species which make the region so popular in early spring. Top of the billing is always Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, and we have been enjoying a good success rate with them on the tours this year so were hopeful of a sighting given the beautiful calm conditions. Our walk down the river bank produced a nice selection of birds, with a singing **Grey Wagtail**, **Marsh Tit**, **Treecreeper**, **Chiffchaff**, **Reed Bunting**, **Stock Dove** and a fly by pair of **Mandarins**. Just as we approached the poplars, we could see a disturbance in the water ahead – two young **Otters** were frolicking around under a willow by the bank! Two people were photographing them at close quarters, and we moved quietly closer and were soon no more than 5m away from the two animals, which were totally unperturbed by our presence. We could hear them sniffing and snorting as they ferreted around beneath the matted weed under the overhanging tree, and occasionally they would chatter to each other too. The views were quite amazing, and a nice lifer for at least one of our group! Onto the task in hand though, and we continued a short way to find that we had missed the female Lesser Spot by a few minutes – we hoped our encounter with the **Otters** hadn't cost us! We hung around at the location for a while, listening carefully and scanning the trees for movement. Another group of birders appeared and told us they'd seen a female much further on, so we now weren't sure whether to stick or twist. Thankfully we stayed put and carried on scanning, and suddenly the male **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** flew across the river and landed just above our head! He flew up onto a dead branch, and drummed, before hammering away for a few minutes at the rotting trunk. The views were first class, as we had the sun behind us and the bird close overhead. He soon flew a short way, but we relocated him again and had further scope views for five minutes or so, and heard the bird call a few times before he re-crossed the river and flew out of site. A brilliant result!



Male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker excavating this morning

Walking back up, we took a detour on the way back to check a favoured spot for **Woodlark**. Surprisingly they were not singing today, but we had lovely views of one, probably a male, calling occasionally as it moved around unobtrusively in the long grass. Eventually he flew up into the edge of the pines and perched beautifully in the sun. All the while, small groups of finches were flying up out of the pines – mainly **Siskins**, **Bramblings** and **Chaffinches**, but also a few **Redpolls**. We located a single redpoll feeding low down close to the path in a small silver birch – it was a **Mealy Redpoll**, fairly large and big-billed, with a generally pale ground colour, white wing bars and white undertail coverts with single shaft streak. A bit further on, we found three **Lesser Redpolls** feeding in a similar fashion, giving us a nice chance to compare the two varieties! Another **Marsh Tit** showed very well too, rounding off an excellent session.

We had struggled so far this season to find any **Stone Curlews**, and keen to rectify this, we headed further south to a good site for finding the birds early in the season. Our luck was in today, as we had great scope views of two **Stone Curlews** standing motionless among the heather. As we scoped them, a **Woodlark** called occasionally behind us, eventually perching up nicely in a sapling, and a pair of **Stonechats** were also around. Whenever you are birding in the brecks, any commotion from local corvids is always worth careful investigation – sure enough, the agitated behaviour from the **Rooks** alerted us to a large female **Goshawk** circling over the heath, and we were able to watch the bird soaring for some time mobbed by various corvids and looking enormous by comparison! We were even able to get some scope views, and see the birds distinctive flight silhouette well. It eventually made off over distant woodland – another nice bonus bird! We had lunch in the company of another **Woodlark**, which sat silently in a birch tree the whole time we ate our sandwiches – a good day for this species.

Heading back into the forest, we had originally planned to try for the **Great Grey Shrike** but forestry operations in the area meant we were not able to access the clearing today. We instead spent some time looking for **Crossbills**, and had some fantastic views of 4-5 different birds, including a lovely singing male who obliged for some prolonged scope views for us. Our target birds were falling nicely, and we had one major one still to find before the end of the day. This meant a visit to Lynford, to look for the **Hawfinches**, and generally enjoy some excellent woodland birding as the forest resounded to the songs of many species this afternoon. **Bramblings** and **Redwings** were both observed in full song – closing our eyes, we could have been in Scandinavia rather than south Norfolk! We really enjoyed watching the summer plumaged **Bramblings** feeding in a ride with **Siskins** and **Yellowhammers** alongside in the afternoon sunshine – perhaps one of the highlights of the whole day in fact (and there had been several!). Further down into the arboretum, we checked in on our regular roosting **Tawny Owl**, which was in residence and gave some tantalising views among the dark tangle of branches it chooses to call home, way up in the top of a tall conifer. Crossing the bridge, we could immediately see that there were lots of birds moving around in the treetops in the centre of the paddocks – lots of **Redwings**, restlessly whizzing around and again in full song, clearly getting ready to depart for Scandinavia. Among them were five **Hawfinches**, and they were equally busy, hardly sitting still for a moment as they chased among the branches, the males pausing to sing occasionally. We watched them for the next half an hour, and ended up with a minimum of eleven birds and some really great views – the males looked stunning in the low evening light. Eventually they all made their way up into the conifers for roosting, and the **Redwings** all took to the air with a cacophony of ‘seeeps’, and that was that. The **Tawny Owl** showed a bit better on our return, and three **Crossbills** flew low over calling but were not coming down to drink in their usual spot – thankfully we had enjoyed great views in the forest earlier on. Up near the car park, a **Firecrest** sang from deep inside a big **Holly** and we had to be very patient to get some glimpses of the bird among the branches. Eventually it showed quite well to about half the group, before flitting up high into an ivy covered tree out of view – one for another day!

To end our day, we used the last half hour of good light back up in the Wensum valley looking for owls. Despite the excellent conditions, we failed to find a **Barn Owl** this evening but we did have some decent glimpses of one of our resident **Little Owls**, which popped out to perch on an old palette in a tumbledown barn. We managed a few scope views of the bird, which was quite active and

mobile, and not quite sitting still long enough for everyone to see it well. We saw the pair mating last week, so know them to be nesting close by, and this seemed to be most likely the male out and about while the female is perhaps getting ready to lay. With Yellowhammer and Chiffchaff in song as dusk fell, it had certainly felt like a spring like day.

WEDNESDAY 20TH MARCH – *Broken cloud and sunny spells, calm, 15C*

A bit of a mix today, as we combined some breckland and forest birding with an afternoon on the coast. It was a bit of an up and down sort of day, but with some nice spring highlights. We started at Sculthorpe Moor NR, where a Coues's Arctic Redpoll had been overwintering and regularly visiting the feeders there. As soon as we arrived at the niger feeders, we could see a pale redpoll feeding there with bright white wing bars and a large amount of unstreaked white on the rump and we thought it was going to be the bird in question. However, after everyone got their scopes up and we focussed in more closely on the bird, we could see that it didn't look right – the bill looked big, and the plumage was a bit too heavily streaked. Sure enough, the bird flew up into the alders and despite looking even paler now, showed numerous dark arrowhead markings on its undertail which pointed to the correct identification as a **Mealy Redpoll**. We saw the same bird again later on and had a good view of its rump, which showed a good clean band of unstreaked white through the centre at least matching that of the actual Arctic, but it always looked quite dark and 'swarthy' and large-billed – they're not easy! At least four different **Mealy Redpolls** were coming to the feeders, and two or three **Lesser Redpolls**. One of the Mealy's was a fine male, with raspberry flushed cheeks and breast. Siskins were dropping in frequently too, so despite not seeing our main target, it was a nice spot to stand with the sun on your back! Wandering further down into the reserve, we enjoyed **Bullfinches**, **Bramblings** and **Reed Buntings** at the Whitley Hide feeders, and had excellent views of a **Red Kite** over the big clearing. As we walked back, we caught sight of another raptor cruising high above, and were surprised to see that it was a ringtail **Hen Harrier**, a very good local sighting. The warming temperatures were encouraging the local **Common Buzzards** up in numbers too, and a pair of **Sparrowhawks** showed really well with the male in full display and the female perching up in the poplars. After another check back at the feeders for the redpolls, it was back to the car park for coffee and on to our next stop.



Mealy Redpoll at Sculthorpe Moor – a smart raspberry red male!

We had enjoyed a decent view of a **Goshawk** on yesterdays foray into the Brecks, but we were left wanting more prolonged scope views for everyone, so decided to do a smash and grab back into the north Brecks to try again given it was such a fine morning. Within moments of setting up our scopes at our chosen watchpoint, a male **Goshawk** circled into view and put on a great show, powering up to a height on deep, slow wingbeats before soaring around over the road for about ten minutes and allowing everyone the chance to follow it in the scope – excellent! Red Kite was seen again here, and many Common Buzzards, so it had been worth the trip down,

Lunch would be back up on the coast at Thornham Harbour, where we enjoyed our first coastal birding of the trip – flocks of Brent Geese rising off the marsh, and Black-tailed Godwit and Grey Plover in the creek. There was no sign of the Twite flock today, which may well have departed in the mild weather, but a fine male Marsh Harrier cruised by and it was nice to eat our sandwiches to a soundtrack of the saltmarsh on such a lovely calm day. Titchwell would be our destination for the remainder of the day, and we started with a good search for the Woodcock near the car park, but to no avail. The regular **Water Rail** was much more confiding, feeding right out in the open in the ditch by the main path. The freshmarsh was bustling with activity, though this was mostly gulls! The burgeoning colony looks to have even more **Mediterranean Gulls** than ever in attendance this year, and our entire visit was punctuated with their distinctive ‘kyaow’ calls. Avocets were around in small numbers, and a roost of **Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits** in breeding plumage were a very nice addition. Small numbers of Knot were roosting on the islands too, ahead of the incoming tide, and we picked out a couple of Dunlin and Turnstone as well.



Red Crested Pochard at Titchwell – one of the gaudier birds seen on the tour!

Nipping down to the beach, we added five Sanderling, and offshore a quiet sea hosted two pairs of **Red-breasted Mergansers**. The tidal pool was more interesting, with flocks of Grey Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit resting there and best of all, a fine male **Northern Wheatear** hopping around on the turf at the back – our first of Spring. The pair of **Red Crested Pochards** were on this pool too, looking particularly dazzling in the low afternoon sun. Back to Parrinder Hide, and we ended the day watching the comings and goings of the **Mediterranean Gulls**, counting a minimum of 140 of these beautiful and charismatic gulls close to the hide. Better still though was an adult **Little Gull** which we picked out resting on a small island right of the hide – another year tick on tour! With another fruitless search for the Woodcock on the way back, we rounded off the day at dusk and headed back to base.



Mediterranean Gulls – looking dapper in the evening light at Titchwell

THURSDAY 2ST MARCH – *Sunny spells and calm, 15C*

Another fine day of weather for our final day spent ‘mopping up’ on some target birds on the Norfolk coast. We started off by visiting a site where we hoped to get some better views of **Firecrest**, as we had only managed pretty sketchy views down in the Brecks. One of our favoured spots for the species on the Cromer-Holt ridge came up trumps, with a male to be heard singing as soon as we got out of the van. In all, we heard three different singing males, and had excellent views of two of them, flitting among the bare branches of an oak catching midges, and pausing to sing occasionally. One flicked

into the front of an old ivy covered trunk, and its bronze-washed shoulders shone out against the dark background – lovely! Onto the heaths next, to have a look for our first **Dartford Warbler** of the year. We hoped we might hear some singing, with it being such a lovely calm day. Yellowhammer and Chiffchaff song greeted us, and Red Kite was again seen circling over – we had seen this species at virtually every site we had visited in the last few days. Success in finding **Dartford Warblers** outside the breeding season normally revolves around finding the resident Stonechats, though we weren't sure if the two species would be hanging around together at the moment. We found a pair of Stonechats, and sure enough, a Dartford Warbler was rooting around in the same bush underneath them. It didn't stay there long though, but burst into song, heading off in a song flight and perching right on the top of a silver birch. Over the next half hour, we watched with a scope and the male Dartford would frequently pop out and sing from an open perch, giving some really fantastic views. He was never far away from the Stonechats though, of which there were now two pairs, and a Woodlark fluted in song flight overhead – a superb morning!



Dartford Warbler – uncharacteristically good views were had today on the heath

Dropping down onto the coast we headed next to Holkham, where we hoped to have our final session of the season with the wintering **Shorelarks**, which would soon be heading off to northern

climes. A few Pink-footed Geese were by Lady Anne's Drive as we set off in the warm sunshine – we really had been very lucky with the weather on this trip. Out in the bay, it didn't take us long to find the **Shorelarks**, which flew in high from the north calling. They were chasing each other around, and flying high up into the blue sky in pursuit of each other calling all the time – quite unlike their usual behaviour, and indicative that they would soon be on their way. Eventually they settled among the sea lavender, and we watched them through the scopes with the sun behind us. Really stunning birds, and a lifer for some in the group. The sea was generally quiet, but a few hundred **Common Scoter** were offshore, and thirteen **Common Eider** flew east.

We didn't have too much time left before departure to King's Lynn station, but opted to lunch in Burnham Overy harbour and then have a quick walk out onto the seawall to check the grazing marshes. The new flooding out on the marsh here has created some excellent habitat for wildfowl and waders, and looks really exciting for the spring. Today it was full of Teal, Shoveler and Gadwall, plus a **Great White Egret** was stalking along one of the reedy channels. In the distance, three **Spoonbills** could be seen flying away, not the best of views, but nice to see all the same. Brent Geese, Avocets and Black-tailed Godwit were some of the species seen on the mudflats, and of course a Red Kite circled over us! Back at the harbour, we said farewell to John and Colin who were heading home, while the rest of us had a cuppa and scanned the harbour. Three **Spoonbills** – an adult and two immatures – dropped onto the saltmarsh right in front of us. The adult was in full breeding plumage, with a gold gorget and full crest. What stunning birds to round off our tour!

Systematic List

1. Brent Goose
2. Canada Goose
3. Greylag Goose
4. Pink-footed Goose
5. Egyptian Goose
6. Mute Swan
7. Shelduck
8. Shoveler
9. Gadwall
10. Wigeon
11. Mallard
12. Teal
13. Mandarin
14. Tufted Duck
15. Common Pochard
16. Red Crested Pochard
17. Eider
18. Common Scoter
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. Hen Harrier
33. Red Kite
34. Buzzard
35. Water Rail
36. Moorhen
37. Coot

38. Stone Curlew
39. Oystercatcher
40. Avocet
41. Lapwing
42. Grey Plover
43. Ringed Plover
44. Curlew
45. Black-tailed Godwit
46. Bar-tailed Godwit
47. Turnstone
48. Knot
49. Sanderling
50. Dunlin
51. Redshank
52. Black-headed Gull
53. Common Gull
54. Mediterranean Gull
55. Great Black-backed Gull
56. Herring Gull
57. Lesser Black-backed Gull
58. Little Gull
59. Stock Dove
60. Woodpigeon
61. Collared Dove
62. Barn Owl
63. Tawny Owl
64. Little Owl
65. Great-spotted Woodpecker
66. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
67. Common Kingfisher
68. Kestrel
69. Peregrine
70. Jay
71. Magpie
72. Jackdaw
73. Rook
74. Carrion Crow
75. Coal Tit
76. Blue Tit
77. Great Tit
78. Marsh Tit
79. Treecreeper
80. Nuthatch
81. Skylark
82. Shorelark
83. Woodlark
84. Long-tailed Tit
85. Dartford Warbler
86. Common Chiffchaff
87. Goldcrest
88. Firecrest
89. Wren
90. Starling
91. Blackbird
92. Song Thrush
93. Fieldfare
94. Redwing
95. Mistle Thrush
96. Robin
97. Common Stonechat
98. House Sparrow

- 99. Dunnock
- 100. Pied Wagtail
- 101. Grey Wagtail
- 102. Meadow Pipit
- 103. Chaffinch
- 104. Brambling
- 105. Bullfinch
- 106. Hawfinch
- 107. Common Crossbill
- 108. Greenfinch
- 109. Linnet
- 110. Goldfinch
- 111. Eurasian Siskin
- 112. Lesser Redpoll
- 113. Mealy Redpoll
- 114. Yellowhammer
- 115. Reed Bunting