



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT NORFOLK SPRING MIGRATION 15TH – 18TH APRIL 2019

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TUESDAY 16TH APRIL – *Hazy sunshine and moderate easterly winds. 12C*

We headed east for the first day of our Norfolk spring migration tour today, a decision which looked a no-brainer with several good birds to look for, including a long-staying Hoopoe and Ring Ouzels – the reality was slightly different! Winterton would be our first stop, where the *Upupa epops* had been hanging out, and we set off into the south dunes with trepidation in the hope of a sighting. After combing the area about half a mile south of the road, and back again through the valley, we had not only failed to find the target bird, but not seen a lot else either! Three **Wheatears** and a singing Chiffchaff were about the size of it. The dune system here is massive, and without some further gen to point us in the right direction, we had to accept that we weren't going to find it today. Offshore, several parties of Gannets were heading south in the stiff wind, and the odd Swallow was hurrying south.

Heading north towards Horsey, we made a couple of roadside stops to scan the coastal fields. A pair of **Marsh Harriers** were skydancing at our first stop, the female flying high into the blue sky and pulling some spectacular loop-the-loop manoeuvres while giving her Lapwing-like call. A bit further down along Horsey straight, we stopped to scan a large Mute Swan herd, and saw a **Great White Egret** stalk up out of one of the dykes. The bird flew low across the field and then settled in the open for us, giving some good views. Among the Greylag, a single **Tundra Bean Goose** was seen distantly – this winter straggler could be identified by its heavy, deep based black bill and dark chocolatey brown upperparts. In the hedge behind us, the first **Common Whitethroat** of spring burst into song, and perched briefly in the top of the hedge – this had been a good stop!

Waxham next, and after parking up at Shangri-la we walked south to look for the recently reported Ring Ouzels. A pair of **Blackcap** were in the copse, with the singing male showing nicely. There was also a clear emergence of overwintered Peacock butterflies in the warming sunshine, with many seen along the walk, and Swallows were again trickling south along the dune ridge. In the field the Ring Ouzels should have been in, there were four **Wheatears**, but no sign of any mountain blackbirds. We walked further down, towards the old pipe dump, and Nick saw a male Ring Ouzel really distantly looking towards the chicken farm, but the rest of us missed it and despite our best efforts to relocate it, the bird completely vanished and we didn't see it again. It was now already 1.30pm though, and we were a fair way from the van, so we started making our way back up. We were certainly ready for our sandwiches, which we had in the sunshine by Waxham church.

Potter Heigham Marshes would be our final destination for the rest of the afternoon, to add a bit of variety and some waterbirds to our list. The pools here still hold a lot of water at this time of year, and there were a lot of gulls and ducks here rather than waders. Still, we saw a good selection, with a **Common Sandpiper** being a year tick for most and a cracking pair of adult **Mediterranean Gulls** on one of the islands. A drake **Garganey** then swam into view, a really smart bird and one we were certainly hoping to find here. In the end we saw probably as many as five different birds, with two pairs and a single drake. Two Avocets also flew in, and a fine male Marsh Harrier flew right past us along the River Thurne bank. Passerine migrants had certainly been in short supply in the cool winds, so it was good to at least hear a snatch of song from a Sedge Warbler as we walked back. Great Crested and Little Grebes, Wigeon, Gadwall and Shoveler were also seen, and on our way out we had more excellent scope views of one of the drake **Garganey**. From here it was an hour back to base – a challenging day.

WEDNESDAY 17TH APRIL – *Fine and sunny in moderate east winds, 14C*

Today was a contrast to yesterday both in terms of weather and birds! With lighter winds throughout the day, and more sunshine, it was the perfect temperature for our long walk out through Burnham Overy Dunes and Holkham, and it felt distinctly more spring like in birding terms too with an excellent flush of summer migrants juxtaposed with some winter stragglers. Four House Martins over the pub as we set off set the tone for the day, and we added a cracking **Barn Owl** and brace of **Grey Partridge** by the time we reached Holkham. Parking a second vehicle at Lady Anne's Drive, we

then drove round to Burnham Overy Staithe and parked at the top of Whincover. With the Alexanders in bloom, bumblebees buzzing around the hawthorn blossom and the first Lesser **Whitethroat** of the year in song, we had high hopes as we set off towards the dunes. Our first **Sedge Warblers** of the year were also singing along the track here, and the last Pink-footed Geese of winter were grazing on the marsh. Just before the sea wall, a **Grasshopper Warbler** began reeling as we approached. It was initially very elusive, only giving brief snatches of song from deep cover by the dyke, but eventually it got going and worked its way up into a dog rose where we could get a scope on it for everyone. A **Great White Egret** flew along the marsh too – a species which barely gets a second glance from our groups these days! Up on the seawall, a few waders included a stunning breeding plumaged male **Icelandic Black-tailed Godwit**, a few Avocets and a Grey Plover, while the last Brent Geese of winter flew off the saltmarsh and onto the reedbed pool for a bathe. The rest of the walk to the dunes was quiet, apart from a single **Whimbrel** hurrying over east along the dune ridge. Two Blackcap were in the boardwalk bushes, and our first two **Wheatear** of the day were along the fenceline – it had been a lively start!

Heading west towards Gun Hill, three more **Wheatear** were seen, but it was otherwise quiet – a **Spoonbill** came off the saltmarsh as we retraced our way back to the boardwalk, and was the first of many seen today. East of the boardwalk things got more interesting, with another flush of half a dozen **Wheatear**, and then three **Ring Ouzels** feeding in the dunes just west of the pines. While we tried to get round the back of the ouzels for better views, a male **Common Redstart** popped into view and added a very welcome splash of spring colour – excellent! The ouzels were not easy with lots of walkers in the dunes moving them around, but we got lucky as one of them perched up on a bush right in front of us for a few moments before they all took flight and headed past us. We returned to the **Redstart**, which was now on the fenceline, and showing much better in the improving light. Heading into the pines, we could hear the dry wheeze of a singing **Brambling** and found two feeding among the cones, while a flurry of butterflies in the warm sunshine here included our first Holly Blue, Green-veined White and Orange Tip of the year. It was clear that there were in fact a number of **Brambling** feeding in the pines, but it was only once we took the birding trail through the willows just west of crosstracks, that we had good views of them. Here, a dozen or so were coming to drink from a small puddle under the bushes, and there were some dazzlingly fine males with glossy black heads. It was great to hear them singing too, and compare their short, dry and monotone wheeze with the more musical song of the Greenfinch.



Shorelark at Holkham – one of 23 seen today

Joe Jordan Hide provided us with a welcome rest stop, as we had walked a good distance today so far. Two more **Great White Egrets** were seen from here, while a number of **Spoonbills** around the colony included three full adults on the main lagoon from the hide. A pair of **Garganey** also swam into view here, and a **Green Sandpiper** fed with Redshank at the edge of the pool. Throw in a **Red Kite**, passing **Peregrine** and the ubiquitous Marsh Harriers, and we were having a busy time! It was now 1.30pm though, and with a half hour walk back, we really needed to get moving. Six **Willow Warbler** singing along the route back were a real sign that spring had arrived, and even back at Lady Anne's Drive as we had lunch we enjoyed more birds – two more **Green Sandpipers**, and four **Little-ringed Plovers** chasing each other around calling. After what proved to be a rather late lunch, we decided to wander out onto the beach as we met a birder who had seen the **Shorelarks** earlier on. The light was fantastic, the beach was totally out of the wind and the **Shorelarks** performed – 23 of them scurrying within a few metres of us at the edge of the track. They really did look something special in this light, and now in full plumage too, with neat black mask and 'horns', and a bright rusty wash on the nape.

We didn't have time to do another main site today, so opted instead to pop down and check the flashes at North Point east of Wells on our way home. There was a good hand of Teal and Gadwall present, plus four **Ruff**, two Sand Martin, another two Wheatear, three Common Snipe and a singing Cetti's Warbler. That really was enough excitement for one action-packed day, and we returned to base with probably not far shy of 100 species in the notebook.

THURSDAY 18TH APRIL – *Sunshine and a fresh easterly breeze, 14C*

A really nice days birding to wrap up the tour today, with a more relaxed pace after yesterdays long walk at overy! We headed down to Wells Woods first off this morning, to make the most of the warm, sheltered birches early morning before the crowds descended, and to see if any migrants had trickled in overnight. The woods were full of birdsong, and **Willow Warblers** have now taken over from Chiffchaffs with six in song around The Dell. Interestingly, there were a good few Goldcrest about, and also several thrushes, which included a party of ten **Redwing**. Single Redpoll and half a dozen **Brambling** were also no doubt getting ready to depart, and a lovely **Firecrest** was found feeding low down under the birches south of the toilet block. We checked the more open area west of The Dell and added two **Sedge Warblers**, but try as we might, we couldn't find a Pied Fly. On Quarles Marsh, there were good numbers of Teal and still a few Wigeon, while a skydancing pair of Marsh Harriers were overhead calling.

Next up was Stiffkey, and we wanted to try for a **Great Grey Shrike** which had been present in recent days down on the coastal footpath. Reaching the area of gorse and scrub where the bird had been seen yesterday, there was no immediate sign of it. Singles of Willow Warbler and Blackcap were in the bushes, and a flock of Brent Geese were on the marsh. The familiar 'kyaow!' of **Mediterranean Gulls** could also be heard as a pair passed over, and a fine **Whimbrel** was feeding on the saltmarsh and gave us some excellent views. Checking the next area of scrub to the west, we had amazing views of a **Short-eared Owl**, which came out of the gorse and then flew right along the coast path towards us, passing no more than a few feet from us. It ended up being pursued by a number of gulls, and landed on the saltmarsh where they continued to bombard it. Heading back, we started to make our way towards the fen, when a suspicious silhouette appeared on a distant bush – it was the **Great Grey Shrike**! The bird flew almost right away, but perched again in the hedge a bit nearer to us. We just about managed to get everyone on it, before it dropped out of view. There were now a few other birders present, but none of us saw it again! We had no idea where it went! We decided to crack on anyway, as we had at least seen it, and make our way to Titchwell for lunch.

It was warm and sunny in Titchwell car park and we had a singing Cetti's Warbler there while we ate lunch – the bird perched up briefly and then flew along the back of the car park into cover. A male Blackcap was more obliging, singing its heart out in the open. Heading onto the reserve, we had some good views of **Bearded Tits** by the west bank path, and heard both Sedge and Reed Warbler singing too. We only went as far as the freshmarsh today, and from Parrinder Hide there was a nice flock of

Sandwich Terns resting. One was colour ringed, from a scheme in North-east Scotland, and two Common Terns were also with them – our first of the year. As well as the hundreds of Mediterranean Gulls present, we also saw four Black-tailed Godwits, four male Ruff just starting to come into plumage, and a pair of Little-ringed Plovers. There was just time for good views of the faithful Water Rail on the way back, in its usual ditch, before we returned to Ryburgh by the scenic route via Docking – noting a lovely party of Yellowhammers on the way.



Sandwich Terns – a nice flock was resting on Titchwell freshmarsh

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Little Grebe
2. Great Crested Grebe
3. Great Cormorant
4. Grey Heron
5. Little Egret
6. Great White Egret
7. Eurasian Spoonbill
8. Northern Gannet
9. Mute Swan
10. Greylag Goose
11. Canada Goose
12. Egyptian Goose
13. Pink-footed Goose
14. Tundra Bean Goose
15. Brent Goose
16. Common Shelduck
17. Mallard
18. Common Teal
19. Garganey
20. Gadwall
21. Northern Shoveler
22. Eurasian Wigeon
23. Tufted Duck
24. Common Pochard
25. Red-legged Partridge
26. Grey Partridge

27. Common Pheasant
28. Common Kestrel
29. Marsh Harrier
30. Common Buzzard
31. Red Kite
32. Peregrine
33. Common Moorhen
34. Common Coot
35. Water Rail
36. Pied Avocet
37. European Oystercatcher
38. Little-ringed Plover
39. Northern Lapwing
40. Common Redshank
41. Green Sandpiper
42. Common Sandpiper
43. Eurasian Curlew
44. Whimbrel
45. Black-tailed Godwit
46. Ruff
47. Common Snipe
48. Black-headed Gull
49. Common Gull
50. Herring Gull
51. Lesser Black-backed Gull
52. Great Black-backed Gull
53. Mediterranean Gull
54. Sandwich Tern
55. Common Tern
56. Woodpigeon
57. Collared Dove
58. Stock Dove
59. Barn Owl
60. Short-eared Owl
61. Skylark
62. Shorelark
63. Pied Wagtail
64. Barn Swallow
65. House Martin
66. Sand Martin
67. Wren
68. European Robin
69. Common Redstart
70. Common Stonechat
71. Northern Wheatear
72. Dunnock
73. Common Blackbird
74. Ring Ouzel
75. Song Thrush
76. Mistle Thrush
77. Redwing
78. Cetti's Warbler
79. Sedge Warbler
80. Reed Warbler (H)
81. Grasshopper Warbler

82. Blackcap
83. Common Chiffchaff
84. Willow Warbler
85. Common Whitethroat
86. Lesser Whitethroat (H)
87. Goldcrest
88. Firecrest
89. Blue Tit
90. Great Tit
91. Coal Tit
92. Long-tailed Tit
93. Bearded Tit
94. Rook
95. Carrion Crow
96. Western Jackdaw
97. Common Magpie
98. Eurasian Jay
99. Common Starling
100. Great Grey Shrike
101. House Sparrow
102. Chaffinch
103. Brambling
104. Goldfinch
105. Common Linnet
106. Reed Bunting
107. Yellowhammer