



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT **NORFOLK SPRING MIGRATION** **17TH – 20TH MAY 2021**

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TUESDAY 18TH MAY - *Sunny spells and light Westerly breeze, 15C*

Today was our first residential tour since December 2020 due to the continuing Covid-19 pandemic, and it felt fantastic to finally get back out into the field with a group again after such a long time! We dodged all the rain showers too, and racked up a superb array of birds with both number and variety on offer despite a fairly 'quiet' day generally for migrants. We started our tour down at Burnham Overy with one of our favourite walks down along 'whincover' to the seawall and on to Overy dunes. The lane was a real suntrap and we watched a male Blackcap sallying out among the Alexanders in the hedge bottom and listened to a Lesser Whitethroat rattling away. Reaching the grazing marsh, we spent some time scanning and generally enjoying all the spring sights and sounds on what was a beautifully crisp and clear morning. A male **Marsh Harrier** passed by, and a lone **Whimbrel** was probing the turf among Avocets and Redshanks. Further down, on the freshwater pools west of the track, an adult **Spoonbill** was feeding, no doubt from the nearby breeding colony at Holkham. We are now well used to seeing these superb birds on all our spring to autumn tours here, but this view was quite superb – a breeding plumaged adult, in perfect light, feeding right beside the track. A **Water Rail** was feeding in the open on the same pools, while a **Cuckoo** flew by and the songs of Reed and Sedge Warblers rang out from the brambles and reeds beside the track.



Spoonbill, Burnham Overy 18th May

Reaching the seawall, the saltmarsh habitats to our west added Sandwich, Common and **Little Terns**, another **Whimbrel**, Black-tailed Godwit and more Avocets. On the rising tide, a dozen summer plumaged **Grey Plovers** flushed from the mud at the harbour mouth and flew high off over the marsh towards Scolt Head. The last remaining Brent Geese of winter, soon on their way to Arctic

Russia, were feeding among the Sea Lavendar while Linnets and Reed Buntings sang from the *suaeda*.

Reaching the boardwalk bushes, we noted Sedge Warbler and Common Whitethroat, but it clearly wasn't really a day for any grounded migrants. A single **Wheatear** was seen in the dunes behind, along with a family of Stonechats, and a single Yellow Wagtail flew low west calling. Our walk east through the dunes was pretty quiet, but the view over the marsh produced more views of **Spoonbills**, a **Great White Egret**, numerous Red Kites and best of all, a migrant **Short-eared Owl**. We initially saw the owl fly along the dunes briefly but then it soared up over the marsh, mobbed by a Buzzard, **Red Kite** and several Jackdaws! The bird gained height to an incredible altitude, so it was eventually barely visible high in a white plume of cumulus cloud, before it departed to the north and presumably headed out to sea. Another excellent view of a **Cuckoo** and singing **Lesser Whitethroat** were at the end of the pines, before we retraced our route all the way back to the van up by the coast road. Swifts had now gathered over the reedbed and were screeching over in small groups – a fantastic sight and sound!



Short-eared Owl, Burnham Overy Dunes

After lunch we battled eastwards along the A149 to Cley, where we took a walk out along East Bank to look primarily for shorebirds. A male **Yellow Wagtail** was holding territory on Pope's Marsh, its simple song audible at quite a distance. More Reed and Sedge Warblers and a brief **Bearded Tit** were noted along the walk, and we picked up another **Spoonbill**, several Sand Martins, Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Curlew, Knot and plenty of rather cute Lapwing chicks. Up at the seaward end of the bank, Sandwich Terns were heading noisily west in small groups, many carrying small fish, and no doubt en route to their breeding colony on Blakeney Point. **Little Terns** were conspicuous too, and we spent some time watching them fishing just offshore.

Wells was our last stop of the day, and the ever-excellent pools at North Point. The light was superb here, and again we remained sandwiched between showers of rain. A male **Blue-headed Wagtail**

had just been found prior to our arrival, and we watched this smart 'flava' in company with a male **Yellow Wagtail**, a female Blue-headed and two **White Wagtails**. Single **Ruff**, Dunlin and **Common Sandpiper** were also present, and two second-summer **Mediterranean Gulls** were surprisingly our only ones of the day, given how common the species now is here in spring. **Little-ringed Plovers** were really obvious here, with probably 3-4 pairs seen including lots of calling and displaying. A superb end to the day and it was quite hard to tear ourselves away!

WEDNESDAY 19TH MAY – *Sunny spells and heavy showers, 13C*

We headed to the Brecks today and managed to dodge pretty much all the showers and bag up a really good haul of top birds. On our way south, we checked a couple of spots for **Stone Curlews** in the northern part of Breckland – the first drew a blank, but the second spot yielded great views of a pair of these curious birds which we were able to watch at quite close quarters by using the van as a mobile hide. We continued on to RSPB Lakenheath, where we would spend the rest of the morning – and we had a spring in our step when we learned that a pair of Golden Orioles had once again been seen at the site in previous days. There had been quite an influx of the species along the coast in the past ten days, so it was always on the cards that they would reappear here. However, the sightings appear to have been isolated to just a couple of days and despite having a good look and listen we didn't record anything ourselves today. Other birds were plentiful though, especially **Cuckoos**! We had fantastic close perched views of a bubbling female, and several males chasing each other around calling. Our first **Hobby** was along the edge of West Wood, first seen in flight and then perched on the edge of the poplars, and a male **Marsh Harrier** came in with food for the female.

Up at Joist Fen, something special was unfolding as a spectacular display of **Hobbies** proved quite mesmerising. At first there were around thirty of these athletic falcons hawking together over the reedbed, but more and more seemed to keep appearing and with every sweep we could count more. Eventually, we notched a whopping 62 (sixty two!) **Hobbies** in the sky at once! This eclipsed even the family of **Common Cranes** over by the railway – a pair with a small chick were seen, plus a lone adult, and then another bird which flew in from extremely high up to the west. A pair of **Bearded Tits**, lots of Reed and Sedge Warblers, and an inquisitive Stoat which ran right up to us along the path, were other highlights. We returned via the riverbank path, where a pair of Common Terns and a few common ducks were seen before we headed back for lunch.

We headed into the forest in the afternoon, first checking one of our favoured tracks for **Woodlark**. Within 100m of the car park, we could hear the softly fluted notes of a **Woodlark** singing from the ground ahead of us, and we soon spotted it sitting among clods of earth in a strip among the heather. There was a pair in fact, and we had some superb views of them as they fed and sang quietly before flying up to the nearby trees. Further on, we visited another ride where a male **Firecrest** could be heard singing as soon as we stepped out of the van. We had superb views of this little gem low down in a pine beside the track, but then noticed as it flew up and perched higher that another bird was sitting beside it – a **Spotted Flycatcher**! A **Tree Pipit** then burst into song behind us and we weren't sure which way to look! Thankfully with patience we got views of all three, noting two pairs of **Tree Pipit** and getting good scope views of one perched on a tiny conifer sapling in the middle of the clearing. **Spotted Flycatchers** numbered three – our first of the year and always a delight to see. We ended the day dodging the rain showers checking a spot for Goshawk – it was late in the day and we weren't hugely optimistic, but it was worth a try. No raptors to show for our efforts, but fifteen distant **Crossbills** and a pair of Curlew were decent compensation. A great day!

THURSDAY 20TH MAY – *A wet and windy day, 12C*

A windy day today with gusty South-westerlies, making it difficult to add much to our tally so far. We had decided to head over to Holme first off, to make the most of the dry morning, and take a wander up through the dunes. Scanning the grazing marsh we saw plenty of Marsh Harriers, and a **Cuckoo** flew in and perched up in the buckthorn by the path. A **Great White Egret** was also seen, an individual with a black bill, and over the sea a small group of Common Scoter scuttled distantly west. The highlight of the morning though, was a superb pair of **Turtle Doves** in the sea buckthorn. One flew past low beneath us, and the light was perfect for observing its beautiful tortoiseshell back pattern and bright white tail tip. The second bird perched for us and allowed scope views – a beautiful bird and always a tour highlight given how scarce they are these days.

Titchwell next, but as we were approaching the reserve we heard that an Alpine Swift had flown west over West Runton, Kelling and Cley. Surely there was a chance it would come all the way along the coast? With this in mind we headed directly down the west bank path and stationed ourselves overlooking the freshmarsh – this gave us a view of any swifts over the water, plus any migrating over the reedbed or following the sea bank to the north. We scanned for about half an hour but there were no further updates on the bird. There were hundreds of Swifts over the marsh feeding in a swirling, tight ball like a shoal of fish. Checking them was hard work! We were also trying to periodically check left and right in case the bird went through on its own. We were just about to give up when we received a text to say it had just gone through the reserve but was now at Holme! We had missed it somehow, and knew we had no further chance to see it. It just goes to show that even when you are in the right place at the right time, birding can be cruel! In truth, there was little else on the reserve, though we did have good views of **Little-ringed Plover** and a fine adult **Mediterranean Gull**. With rain on the way, we decided to head up to Choseley and look for **Corn Bunting** – we managed good views of one signing in a windswept hedgerow, before the rain really set in! A second-summer **Mediterranean Gull**, battling south into the wind over a yellow rape field, looked spectacular against the black sky.

Our final act of the tour was to head east to Wells and re-check North Point, in case anything had dropped in on the weather. Actually there was a reduction of birds here from our previous visit – just **Little-ringed Plovers** of note. It was now lashing down with rain, so we opted to head back to base around 3pm and conclude the tour.