



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT NORFOLK LATE AUTUMN 22ND – 27TH OCTOBER 2018

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TUESDAY 23RD OCTOBER – *Fresh to strong North-west winds and sunshine, 16C*

A good autumn days birding to kick off our 'Winter Thrushes & Eastern Vagrants' tour – especially since we started with an Eastern vagrant! The Cley area would be our destination for the morning, as an 'Eastern' **Stonechat**, either Siberian or Stejneger's, had been discovered over the weekend at Salthouse and we were keen to see it today if it was still around. This complex of taxa are notoriously difficult to separate, and the field identification of the two recently split species is still very much in its infancy, with BBRC reluctant to accept any that have not been confirmed by DNA analysis. Still, the Salthouse bird certainly showed all the characteristics associated with Stejneger's and as this species has not yet formally been accepted onto the Norfolk list [despite the fact it has probably occurred before], it would certainly be a good bird to kick start our week. With the wind in the north-west though, we started with a seawatch from coastguards to start off our trip list, waiting for news of the stonechat to filter through in the meantime. There was a light movement of Wigeon, Brent Geese and Pintail offshore, and there were lots of auks moving at a distance further out. Those that we could identify were Common Guillemots. Gannets were also passing in numbers [they appear to have had a good breeding season, with many juveniles passing] and a small group of **Common Scoter** scuttled by. Best bird was a fine Great Skua, cruising by in perfect light, though a dark Arctic Skua also whizzed by in the opposite direction with the wind up its tail. **Red-throated Divers** were seen passing in small numbers, but two were seen close in on the sea too, allowing for some great scope views. In the Eye Field, a flock of **Golden Plover** were resting, while small skeins of **Pink-footed Geese** were heading west over the village, making for a great sight, and sound.

With positive news now coming through on the stonechat, we headed round to Salthouse and parked by the duck pond. Several Black-tailed Godwits were on the pools here, and a Chiffchaff was in the tamarisks keeping low out of the wind. Walking down Meadow Lane, we found a small gaggle of birders, and the **Stejneger's Stonechat** which was feeding along the leeward edge of a line of reeds, keeping down out of the wind. Over the next half hour we had very good views of it despite the distance, as the light was perfect. Its unstreaked apricot rump and upper tail coverts, black 'armpits', pale supercilia joining above a heavy looking black bill, and somewhat dark looking upperparts were all good features. The underparts were washed apricot, contrasting with a distinct white throat. A very smart and obliging bird! Back at the van, we popped along to Cley Visitor Centre to use the facilities, before returning to East Bank for a walk out to Arnold's Marsh. We didn't see too much here in the strengthening wind, apart from good numbers of Wigeon, Shoveler and Gadwall all in beautiful crystal clear light. Common Snipe, Ruff and the odd passing Rock Pipit were also seen, with a handful of Dunlin on Arnold's and a hunting Marsh Harrier. It was lunchtime, and we headed off to Holkham to park along Lady Anne's Drive in the now gale force blow!

While we lunched, we had absolutely stunning views of up to three **Red Kites**, which were dropping down to feed in the field right beside the van. We kept going on about how good the light was today, but it really did make the best viewing conditions! A small covey of **Grey Partridge** were a nice bonus too, keeping low among the tussocky grass but being very confiding. After lunch we set off through Holkham Meads, with a target of searching tit flocks for a 'Yellow-browed'. Despite several attempts, and some nice views of Goldcrests, Treecreeper and lots of Coal Tits, we couldn't find an *inornatus* today. There were good numbers of Pink-footed Geese on the grazing marsh, and a highlight from Joe Jordan Hide was a female type **Black Redstart** feeding around the lea of a JCB! The bird eventually flew towards us and settled in a hawthorn beside the hide, so that everyone could see it well through the scope – very obliging! Back at Washington Hide on the way back, we were quite fortunate as a lovely **Great White Egret** drifted in after just a few moments, and landed on the pool. It was quite a sight seeing it lumbering in with the low afternoon sunlight glinting through its wing feathers.

We rounded off our day at Stiffkey, but a quick stop on the way through allowed us to get stonking views of the semi resident **Peregrine** at Wells. We actually saw two more **Peregrines** as we arrived at Stiffkey Campsite car park, tussling in the air out over the saltmarsh. Our dusk vigil produced lots of Little Egrets going to roost, plenty of bubbling Curlew and best of all, a fine adult male **Hen Harrier** battling west into the wind, heading off to roost towards the East Hills. A perfect way to end the day!



Peregrine on Wells Church, 23rd October

WEDNESDAY 24TH OCTOBER – *Sunny spells and a moderate NW wind, 15C*

A really superb day in East Norfolk today which had a decidedly wintery feel to the species on offer, even if the weather didn't! We drove the hour or so across to Great Yarmouth and started the day with the high tide at Breydon Water, viewing the east end from the footpath by the A47 road bridge near Asda. A fantastic concentration of birds could be seen in excellent morning light, with big flocks of Wigeon holding a few Teal, Pintail and Shelduck, plus a single juvenile **Garganey** which was not easy to pick out with its subtle features among an ever shifting array of ducks! Dunlin, Redshank, Curlew, Snipe, Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits, Knot and Avocet were all among the waders noted, while all were buzzed into the air in spectacular fashion by a swooping **Peregrine**. Other than the **Garganey** we didn't pick out anything particularly unusual, but just enjoyed the sight and sound of such a large number and variety of roosting birds. Back at the car park though, we did get a nice surprise, as a trilling call alerted us to a passing **Waxwing**, which whizzed across the car park and off north over the superstore building! The first of autumn!

Heading north up the coast, our next stop was Winterton-on-Sea where we spent three hours and enjoyed some great birding, starting with a seawatch off the beach car park. A juvenile **Velvet Scoter** was on the sea, and we were surprised to see it joined by three others, all giving really good views. About ten Common Scoters drifted north on the tide with a single Tufted Duck, and we had good views of Red-throated Divers and two **Common Goldeneye** heading north. We were hearing that on the north coast, lots of **Fieldfare** were arriving so it was no great surprise when a small flock came in off the sea and over the dunes – carrying a single **Redwing** and two **Brambling** with them. A walk north up the beach to look for a recent **Shorelark** did not prove productive – the Linnet flock it was with flushed just as we got there and we saw the back end of the lark amongst them. The birds totalled disappeared though, and we weren't sure whether they had gone over into the main dunes or north along the beach – far too big an area to check all of it thoroughly! We enjoyed some more views of the **Velvet Scoters** again while we had lunch, and then opted for a quick walk into the South Valley to check the trees and scrub below the Hermanus holiday camp. The sycamores on the slope

were in the sun, and out of the wind. The first tree we checked held a couple of tits, but also a skulky warbler. One of the group noted a pale supercilium, but the bird really didn't want to show. With patience though, we pieced together views of a sandy brown chiffchaff, pure white below and with only a little green in the edges of the flight feathers. Black bill and legs, and a brown washed supercilium lacking yellow all pointed nicely to a **Siberian Chiffchaff** of the race *tristis*, an identification which was confirmed nicely by a series of mournful, monosyllabic call notes which we managed to record. A really superb looking bird, and despite feeding mainly on the ground out of view in thick cover beneath the sycamore, it eventually flicked out into full view on the brambles in the sunshine, allowing us to view the subtle plumage in a variety of lights and angles. A Common Chiffchaff was also present, and was quite strikingly different being awash with greens and yellows by comparison! The odd Redwing and Song Thrush were also noted here – it felt like a few birds were arriving in the slackening winds, so we wanted to push on to Waxham and check there.



Siberian Chiffchaff, Winterton 24th October [photo by @winterdune]

The Shangri-la chalet is a good spot to look for migrant passerines, and we had another couple of Redwing and a Fieldfare here, plus a **Brambling** heading inland. The trees were very quiet though, so we continued south a little way along the coast path to check the scrub. Best bird was a fine **Woodcock**, flushed from the hedge bottom and thankfully performing a nice circuit around us as it headed back north to the copse. Four Siskins flew over, and just as we were about to leave, six **Common Cranes** were spotted drifting low into fields to the west of Waxham barn! We parked up and found a spot where we could view the cranes – five adults and a youngster – preening quietly. They were distant, but the views through the scope were good in the clear afternoon light. The sight and sound of about two thousand **Pink-footed Geese** flying south towards Horsey was also enjoyed, and a nice little surprise came in the form of four **Whooper Swans** in potato field in the distance looking towards Sea Palling. With only an hour of decent light left, we decided to head home via the coast road by Horsey, in case the geese we had seen flying had dropped into the fields by the windpump. Pulling over to scan, it was clear the geese had not landed here, but instead a **Great White Egret** flew in along Horsey dunes and dropped into a distant dyke. Hopping out of the van for a better look, we realised a second **Great White Egret** was standing at the far edge of the field on the

opposite side of the road! This too flew into a ditch and was lost to view. A mad end to the day was completed by a magnificent **Short-eared Owl**, quartering a meadow by the road. By standing quietly next to the van, the owl came ridiculously close to us and gave some memorable views – a brilliant and breathless day in East Norfolk!

THURSDAY 25TH OCTOBER – *Fine and sunny with moderate NW breeze, 15C*

Despite warming up in the last rays of autumn sunshine, the day actually started the coldest so far at just 5C at first light. We had already planned to head south into the brecks and mix things up a bit with some forest birding. Lynford was our first stop, and it looked stunning this morning with an array of autumn colours and shafts of sunlight streaming through the trees. It was birdy too, with loads of activity from many woodland birds including Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Coal and **Marsh Tits**, Goldcrest and several small groups of **Redwing** which were ‘seeping’ off from the pines as we walked down through the arboretum. By the gate, we enjoyed a really lovely sight as at least a dozen **Brambling** were foraging for Beech mast among a golden carpet of autumn leaves. There were several Chaffinches too, and even a couple of Nuthatches occasionally dropping down and flicking leaves aside in search of the choice nuts. In the Hollies along the path, a high pitched call alerted us to the presence of a **Firecrest**, and we realised the bird was really close, just above us. Eventually it flicked out into full view in a sycamore before being joined by a second bird and chasing off through the canopy calling. With so much going on, we had high hopes as we walked down to the paddocks to check for feeding groups of thrushes and finches. Several **Siskins** were flying around and dropping into one particular bare tree which also held several Redwing and Greenfinch. The distinctive ‘chip-chip’ calls of **Common Crossbills** alerted us to seven birds flying fast through the treetops and off over the arboretum, and these were closely followed by two **Hawfinches** which came straight at us from the conifers in Zigzag Covert and flew east across the paddock and away. An impressive list of targets ticked off in quick succession, but everything remained very active and mobile and we couldn’t improve on the views of any of these species.

After a detour to Santon Downham for a coffee stop and toilet facilities, we headed back north to check some spots for Stone Curlews. Unfortunately we couldn’t find any today despite checking carefully, though we did pick up adult and first-winter **Yellow-legged Gulls** among the throngs of Lesser Black-backs in the pig fields, and a **Woodlark** was a nice bonus flying low overhead. At another spot nearby, we lunched while scanning the forest for raptors, noting several Common Buzzards and two Sparrowhawks. Thrush passage was continuing, with seventy **Fieldfare** south-west overhead and a few more Redwing. Leaving the brecks behind, we headed back up to the coast for the remainder of the afternoon with an exploration of Wells Woods. With sun on the birches and light winds we hoped to be able to find some roving tit flocks and have another chance for a **Yellow-browed Warbler**. In the birches around the east side of The Dell, a large flock of around 40 **Redpolls** were buzzing around calling, the first proper flock of autumn. The birds were very mobile and seldom all in one place at the same time, though we managed to find a few feeding quietly and get some nice close views. Several Goldcrests were also among the birches, and we saw singles of Chiffchaff and Blackcap too. A **Yellow-browed Warbler** was calling close by, but remained well hidden in a big willow clump and wouldn’t co-operate. Further along the track, we turned left and headed down the west side of the caravan park. Here we found another Chiffchaff, and another phylloscopus which was probably a late Willow Warbler, but the views were poor and against the light. The Redpoll flock then wheeled into view and had been joined by a few **Siskin** and **Brambling** – we had our best views yet of them as they dropped into the top of a hawthorn hedge. All the birds we could see were gingery, streaky **Lesser Redpolls**, though we never got to look at the whole flock! A Barn Owl appeared, drifting into The Dell and quartering a few times before heading off – nice! On the walk back, we heard the **Yellow-browed Warbler** calling again, and a couple of the group got a glimpse, before it disappeared to roost. Another busy day!

FRIDAY 26TH OCTOBER – *Sunny spells and fresh to strong NW winds, 10C*

Today we headed to North-west Norfolk, starting our day at Holme where we planned to walk out and check the beach and sea. On the way, a flock of 150 **Fieldfares** caused an impromptu stop, as they were feeding close to the road near Ringstead in a winter wheat field. Once at Holme toilet block, we realised the wind was rather stronger here than we had thought, and the walk out across the golf course was a bit of a battle! At the dunes, sand was blowing and the wind was right in our faces – we needed to find some shelter! A wooden hut on the dunes afforded enough protection from the wind for us to use our scopes, and scan the impressive Oystercatcher roost on the dune slacks along with large numbers of Redshank, Curlew and Knot. Scanning out to sea, the light was superb, and the first bird picked up was a cracking adult **Pomarine Skua** battling west through the troughs! Amazingly a few minutes later, another 8 cruised into view and gave some great views as they banked up above the skyline, many sporting full tail ‘spoons’! We realised something a bit special was happening and that we needed to get closer, as in any case we were hardly out of the wind in the spot we were currently watching from anyway. We decided to march out to the low dunes on the beach and watch from there, as the tide was dropping and we could cross the small channel. As we walked out, we flushed a passerine from the tideline which gave a high, thin call – a **Shorelark**! Sadly the bird didn’t hang around, and we had to make do with flight views as it made off along the beach. Once we got ourselves settled down in the dunes, we began to scan the sea hopefully for more skuas. Four **Great Skuas**, went past, giving good views, and a dozen **Kittiwakes**, plus several Great Crested Grebes and Gannets. Frustratingly the skua passage seemed as if it had been too short lived, but then a flock of eleven **Pomarine Skuas** came into view to the east of our position, and passed slowly past us close inshore. The light was so good we could pick out the dark phase juveniles with their double white underwing flash, though most were pale phase adults with neat white belly patches and tail ‘spoons’. The sight of these Arctic beasts lumbering past on their southbound migration was a bit awe-inspiring, to say the least. Two more groups passed, and we ended up on a total of 34 birds – though the day count was over 150 in the end. Looping back around the dunes to check for the Shorelark, we saw plenty of Rock Pipits, Linnets and Skylarks, but nothing more, and so we returned to the toilet block. An exciting start to the day!



Pomarine Skuas migrating into The Wash, 26th October

Next stop was Thornham Harbour, where our colleague Jason had seen two returning Twite a few days before. A **Spotted Redshank** called and flew into the channel by the car park, giving lovely views, but despite a good search of the creek area we couldn't find any Twite. Brent Geese, Wigeon and Shelduck were plentiful and a superb Red Kite was out over the saltmarsh. Moving on to Titchwell, we didn't have much time before lunch, so decided to complete the Meadow Trail circuit to Patsy's Reedbed before returning for our sandwiches. It was pretty quiet here, with just a few Ruff on the pool and some nice views of Marsh Harriers. A skein of Pink-footed Geese arrived off the sea, and a Chiffchaff was flitting around in the salallows with a couple of Goldcrests. After lunch we headed down the West Bank path, taking in both the hides. The freshmarsh was pretty quiet, apart from plenty of Wigeon, Gadwall, Teal and Shoveler, and the only waders were three Avocets and a small flock of Golden Plover. A **Peregrine** flew west over the reserve, and another couple of Red Kites were added to our huge tally of this increasing raptor for the week. As we returned to the car park, another lovely flock of Fieldfare flew low west and there were now some Redwing in the car park bushes too – we had certainly seen a nice passage of 'Winter Thrushes' during the tour. With only an hour of decent light left, we opted to take a circuitous route home along the back lanes to look for feeding flocks of geese. A **Corn Bunting** perched beautifully on wires at Choseley [and was even singing!] and we saw a couple of small flocks of Pink-footed Geese in winter wheat but nothing to really get stuck into. With strong northerlies and dropping temperatures forecast tomorrow, we have high hopes of more good seawatching to look forward to!

SATURDAY 27TH OCTOBER – *Strong NW winds and heavy showers, 5C*

It felt like winter was just around the corner today, as chilly northerly winds pushing down the north sea brought wintry squalls, and made the thermals necessary for the first time this autumn! Following yesterdays skua passage, seawatching was the obvious option for the first couple of hours of our final day. An excellent number and variety of species were moving over tumultuous seas at Sheringham, where the breakers were hitting the seawall along the promenade and throwing spray high into the air [and often over the massed ranks of Norfolk seawatchers!]. The predominant species heading east was **Kittiwake**, and in the bright periods between the showers we enjoyed some fantastic views of mixed flocks of adults and juveniles passing quite close inshore – by the end of our two hour watch, we had seen at least 1000 birds. Small numbers of Gannets, and plenty of auks were also moving, though most of these were too distant to identify to species. Four **Great Skuas** were seen, all fairly distant, and three **Arctic Skuas** included two dark birds passing east pretty close inshore. The only **Pomarine Skua** seen today though was a fantastic subadult bird which passed low east over the roof of the shelter, just after the passing of a heavy squall. Other species of note included Wigeon and Teal [both passing in hundreds], Common Scoter [50+] and a fine **Great Northern Diver** heading west above the skyline, its huge feet trailing behind it! The final highlight of the morning was a superb **Purple Sandpiper** which popped up on the promenade right in front of us with a group of Turnstones, only a few feet away!

After a welcome, warming cup of coffee back at the car park, we knew we had to head back to Wells to drop one of the group off, so a quick look along the sheltered edge of Holkham pines seemed like a good way to round off the morning. We parked at Lady Anne's Drive and walked east this time, towards Wells. It was very quiet despite being nicely out of the wind – a male Stonechat, Red Kite, **Peregrine**, covey of **Grey Partridge**, handful of Goldcrest, Redwing and several Jays were the best of it. Lunch back at the car park rounded off a very good weeks birding and we headed back to Great Ryburgh through torrential rain and hail, which had piled up at the sides of the road. With the thermometer on the van dipping down to 3C, it felt like we had picked a good time to wrap things up!

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Greylag Goose
2. Pink-footed Goose
3. Canada Goose
4. Brent Goose
5. Mute Swan
6. Whooper Swan
7. Common Shelduck
8. Northern Shoveler
9. Gadwall
10. Eurasian Wigeon
11. Mallard
12. Northern Pintail
13. Eurasian Teal
14. Garganey
15. Common Pochard
16. Tufted Duck
17. Common Scoter
18. Velvet Scoter
19. Common Goldeneye
20. Red-legged Partridge
21. Grey Partridge
22. Common Pheasant
23. Red-throated Diver
24. Great Northern Diver
25. Little Grebe
26. Great Crested Grebe
27. Northern Gannet
28. Great Cormorant
29. Grey Heron
30. Little Egret
31. Great White Egret
32. Western Marsh Harrier
33. Hen Harrier
34. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
35. Red Kite
36. Common Buzzard
37. Common Crane
38. Common Moorhen
39. Eurasian Coot
40. Pied Avocet
41. Eurasian Oystercatcher
42. Grey Plover
43. European Golden Plover
44. Northern Lapwing
45. Common Ringed Plover
46. Eurasian Curlew
47. Bar-tailed Godwit
48. Black-tailed Godwit
49. Ruddy Turnstone
50. Red Knot
51. Ruff
52. Dunlin
53. Purple Sandpiper

54. Common Snipe
55. Eurasian Woodcock
56. Spotted Redshank
57. Common Redshank
58. Great Skua
59. Arctic Skua
60. Pomarine Skua
61. Black-legged Kittiwake
62. Black-headed Gull
63. Common Gull
64. Herring Gull
65. Yellow-legged Gull
66. Lesser Black-backed Gull
67. Great Black-backed Gull
68. Common Guillemot
69. Razorbill
70. Stock Dove
71. Woodpigeon
72. Collared Dove
73. Barn Owl
74. Short-eared Owl
75. Common Kingfisher
76. Waxwing
77. Common Kestrel
78. Peregrine
79. Eurasian Jay
80. Common Magpie
81. Eurasian Jackdaw
82. Rook
83. Carrion Crow
84. Eurasian Skylark
85. Shorelark
86. Woodlark
87. Barn Swallow
88. Coal Tit
89. Eurasian Blue Tit
90. Great Tit
91. Long-tailed Tit
92. Eurasian Nuthatch
93. Eurasian Treecreeper
94. Eurasian Wren
95. Goldcrest
96. Firecrest
97. Cetti's Warbler [H]
98. Common Chiffchaff
99. Yellow-browed Warbler
100. Eurasian Blackcap
101. European Robin
102. European Stonechat
103. Siberian Stonechat
104. Black Redstart
105. Eurasian Blackbird
106. Redwing
107. Song Thrush
108. Mistle Thrush

- 109. Fieldfare
- 110. Common Starling
- 111. Dunnock
- 112. Grey Wagtail
- 113. Pied Wagtail
- 114. Meadow Pipit
- 115. Rock Pipit
- 116. Common Reed Bunting
- 117. Yellowhammer
- 118. Corn Bunting
- 119. Common Chaffinch
- 120. Brambling
- 121. European Greenfinch
- 122. Common Linnet
- 123. European Goldfinch
- 124. Eurasian Siskin
- 125. Lesser Redpoll
- 126. Hawfinch
- 127. Common Crossbill
- 128. House Sparrow