



TOUR REPORT
NORFOLK LATE AUTUMN
24TH – 29TH OCTOBER 2021

MONDAY 25TH OCTOBER – Mod SW winds and sunny spells, 14C

Day one of our five day late autumn Norfolk tour saw us enjoy a great cross-section of species, despite set-in westerly winds for the week offering little promise for us of migrant arrivals from the continent. We started off at Holkham and walked west through the pines towards Overy dunes, noting our first flocks of **Pink-footed Geese** by Lady Anne's Drive and a westerly passage of Starlings ongoing, including some big flocks of several thousand birds. Jays were also on the move, and small numbers of Skylarks and Lapwings were also moving west too. Passerines were few, but there was a few Blackbirds dropping in, one or two **Redwings** and Song Thrushes, single **Brambling** and a couple of groups of **Siskin** buzzing west. Among the shelter of the pines, we found one or two tit flocks containing **Goldcrest**, **Chiffchaff**, Treecreeper and Great-spotted Woodpecker, but not the usual 'nailed on' Yellow-browed Warbler that late October would typically produce! **Red Kites** were very much in evidence, drifting over the pines and gathering in the dunes – they seem to become particularly conspicuous now as they forage along the shore and over the coastal marshes. A single **Redpoll** flew west over the end of the pines, and dropped in briefly in the bushes, and from our vantage point looking inland we could see two **Great White Egrets**. This soon became four from the Joe Jordan hide, where we also saw **Marsh Harrier** and an assortment of wildfowl. Heading back through the meals, a surprise came in the form of a female **Mandarin** – very scarce on the north coast – hiding among the Mallard on Salt's Hole pond.



Grey Phalarope – star of the show at Titchwell today

Inland next to take a drive around beyond Burnham Market to look for foraging **Pink-footed Goose** flocks. We saw around 800 in stubble on the Burnham-Docking road, and a further 700 near Choseley, but generally the flocks seemed to be splintered and we couldn't locate any real concentrations of birds. With the sugarbeet harvest in full swing though, this could well change in the coming days. Reaching Titchwell, we had a late lunch before spending the rest of the day on the reserve. The recent works that have taken place on the freshmarsh have certainly rejuvenated the place, and we could have stared at the main lagoon all afternoon and probably not seen everything!

There were thousands of Teal here in particular, plus a good assortment of waders – **Ruff**, Dunlin, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Avocet** and **Golden Plover** which were present in large numbers. A gorgeous first-winter **Grey Phalarope** stole the show, spinning around at point black range close to the path and present here now for about a week or more. We opted to push on to the shore though, and come back to the freshmarsh later.



Caspian Gull – this second winter arrived in fading light

The beach was also a hive of activity, with the exposed mussel beds swarming with gulls, Brent Geese and waders. Turnstone, **Knot**, **Bar-tailed Godwit** and **Grey Plover** could be seen, while offshore many Great Crested Grebes and **Red-throated Divers** could be seen. Two **Red-breasted Mergansers** appeared briefly too, and careful checking of the Brent revealed a superb adult **Pale-bellied Brent Goose** (race *hrota*). A rather sad looking Common Guillemot was on tidal pool, in line with the recent wreck of this species along the east coast of Britain. Back at freshmarsh, we enjoyed the 'golden hour' as the sun began to set, bathing the hundreds of **Golden Plover** in warm evening light and creating quite a spectacle of birds for us. Gulls were arriving to roost, and we saw at least four adult **Yellow-legged Gulls** among the burgeoning throng. Soon a lovely second-winter **Caspian Gull** appeared too, later joined in the semi-dark by a dark-eyed adult showing a typically greenish tinged bill and wholly white tip to the outermost primary. Starlings whirled in to bathe pre-roost, numbering many thousands, and a **Spotted Redshank** 'chu-wit'-ed past us over the west bank path. Eventually we had to tear ourselves away, and we left the **Grey Phalarope** still spinning around in the half light as we headed off for home around 6pm.

TUESDAY 26TH OCTOBER – *Light Southerly winds and sunshine, 14C*

We headed East today and enjoyed a productive day exploring the Broads area, starting at Winterton which has been something of a seawatch hotspot of late. The regular White-billed Diver failed to fly by while we were there, but we still had an excellent hour gazing out with the scopes in excellent morning light. **Razorbills** and **Red-throated Divers** were dotted around, with one of the latter extremely close in to the beach and showing brilliantly well. Further out, a small flock of **Common Scoter** were being escorted along by a lone female **Velvet Scoter**, which was tricky to view looking south and more into the sunlight. It was certainly easier to see when it went solo than when

it got buried in among the rest of the flock! Various gulls were moving in and dip feeding over the water before continuing on and this constant turnover included a fine first-winter **Caspian Gull** which also flew in and briefly landed on the beach before heading south right past us. Its white 'hood' and striking tail pattern were very noticeable features in flight. Several **Mediterranean Gulls** were also drifting in and out, including two lovely snowy adults and a boldly marked first-winter. As we scanned the sea, we picked up some distant goings-on to the north of us and when focussing in with the scope, could see a **Short-eared Owl** arriving in off the sea, mobbed by Great Black-backed Gulls! The owl made a fairly laboured landfall, circling high to evade its suitors, and we lost sight of it in the end as it crossed Horsey dunes. Two **Swallows** flew south over the sea and two **Redpolls** chattered in and landed briefly in the car park before continuing on their way. A hybrid Carrion x Hooded Crow was also seen before we took a break for coffee and moved on towards Waxham.

A Great Grey Shrike had been very mobile and elusive in the area over the last day and we decided to have a go for it from the dunes south of the Shangri-La chalet. No-one had seen the bird for over an hour and it had seemingly disappeared into Poplar Farm and so we weren't lucky with a sighting. Around 1000 **Pink-footed Geese** were in the fields though and three **Common Cranes** were seen distantly in flight over the woods beyond. Heading back south around the coastal route to Somerton, we then had superb views of perhaps the same three **Common Cranes** feeding in a roadside field by Burley Hall Farm. We watched this small family group for about half an hour and they didn't even move when the farmer drove past them in his truck – though they did spook briefly into the air when a Hare ran past them!



Common Crane family at West Somerton

Potter Heigham Marshes was our last port of call in the afternoon and we enjoyed a decent spread here, with lots of wildfowl plus a scattering of waders – two **Green Sandpipers**, two Dunlin, two **Spotted Redshanks**, several each of Ruff, Snipe and Black-tailed Godwit and a lovely juvenile **Little Stint** were the best of it. A **Water Pipit** was feeding furtively at the edge of the reeds at the north end, giving some tricky views as it weaved in and out of the vegetation, and two more **Cranes** flew silhouetted against the sky over the woods towards the Hickling tree tower. A super evening, with

Bearded Tits and Cetti's Warblers calling in the reeds and a Marsh Harrier quartering beside us as we headed back out along the track. A solid late autumn days birdwatching all round!

WEDNESDAY 27TH OCTOBER – *Strong SW winds and sunshine, 14C*

Its fair to say that 2021 hasn't been a stellar autumn for east coast birders, and we did start to feel the brunt of it a bit today with a tough day – though in fairness this did still include a couple of nice highlights! We had planned to make Holkham Bay our first stop, as the sea had been reasonably productive there over recent days. As we walked out across the beach under the relative calm of the pines, we talked about what we might find and discussed Shorelark as a potential possibility to raise hope that we might get some spending the winter here again this year after a blank season last time out. As we reached the furthest dunes at the east end of the gap, we stopped to scan some Meadow Pipits which had a Reed Bunting in tow, and then spotted two passerines flying in towards us over the marram dunes – they were **Shorelarks**! They flipped over the dune ridge and appeared to land on the beach, so we scurried round with the wind up our tails to see if we could see them. Two dark shapes were sat on the beach, blasted by sand and only just visible through the resultant haze. It was indeed the two **Shorelarks** and we had some decent scope views before they flew out of sight round the side of the dunes and we weren't able to find them again. An exciting encounter!



Shorelark on the windswept beach at Holkham

We then scanned the sea for a while, noting relatively few birds – some auks, a close Red-throated Diver, three Great Crested Grebes, single **Red-breasted Merganser** and a few Common Scoter. Heading back, seven small birds flew over us and landed on the beach some distance away – **Snow Buntings**! Thankfully the light was good and we watched them lift and settle several times before they eventually continued on. What would have been the icing on the cake was a **Short-eared Owl** which flushed out of the dunes at point blank range, but sadly flipped over the blind side and we couldn't see it for more than a few seconds. Still, it had been a decent morning despite the difficult weather conditions.

After a coffee back at the van, and a **Great White Egret** beside Lady Anne's Drive, we headed east to Cley reserve where we would spend the afternoon. Pat's Pool was quite birdy, with lots of Dunlin,

Black-tailed Godwits, Ruff and wildfowl. But not a great deal else! We lunched at the beach car park, where about 300 **Brent Geese** were grazing in the Eye Field and providing a lovely sight and sound. The sea was likewise quiet, other than Red-throated Diver, Gannet and Razorbill. Back at the Visitor Centre, we took a walk out to the central hides and saw more of the same species, plus a few Golden Plovers and a close male Marsh Harrier.

Our plan was to end the day with a watch over the Stiffkey saltmarsh for raptors, but we had a bit of time before that and so popped down to Wells North Point. There were lots of wildfowl here, plus a nice covey of **Grey Partridge** in the fields and a **Rock Pipit** or two coming in to bathe with the Meadow Pipits on the west pool. As the afternoon drew to a close, we relocated to Stiffkey Greenway and scanned the saltmarsh – no Hen Harriers for us tonight but a few skeins of geese, a lovely close **Barn Owl** and then four **Ravens** which flew right past us cronking – still a great sighting in a Norfolk context! A **Little Owl** near Wighton closed the day, as we headed for home.

THURSDAY 28TH OCTOBER – *Strong Southerly winds and sunshine, 15C*

We mixed things up today and headed south into Breckland for some forest birding. It was a beautiful sunny day despite the strong wind, which we managed to keep fairly sheltered from throughout. Our first stop was an area we know well for gathering Stone Curlews prior to their autumn migration, and we were not to be disappointed! Pulling up to scan the fields, the hedgerow beside us was bustling with the hard chirrups of **Tree Sparrows**, an increasingly rare sight and sound in the Norfolk countryside and now finding their main stronghold in the county down in the Brecks. At least twenty were seen and provided a side show for the main event, which was brilliant views of 34 **Stone Curlews** sitting in the middle of the field in full view! We found another position where we had better light and spent some time scoping and photographing these brilliant birds from a safe distance. They weren't even bothered when the farmer drove past within 50yds of them in a huge tractor and trailer! A good start to the day, but could we match it?



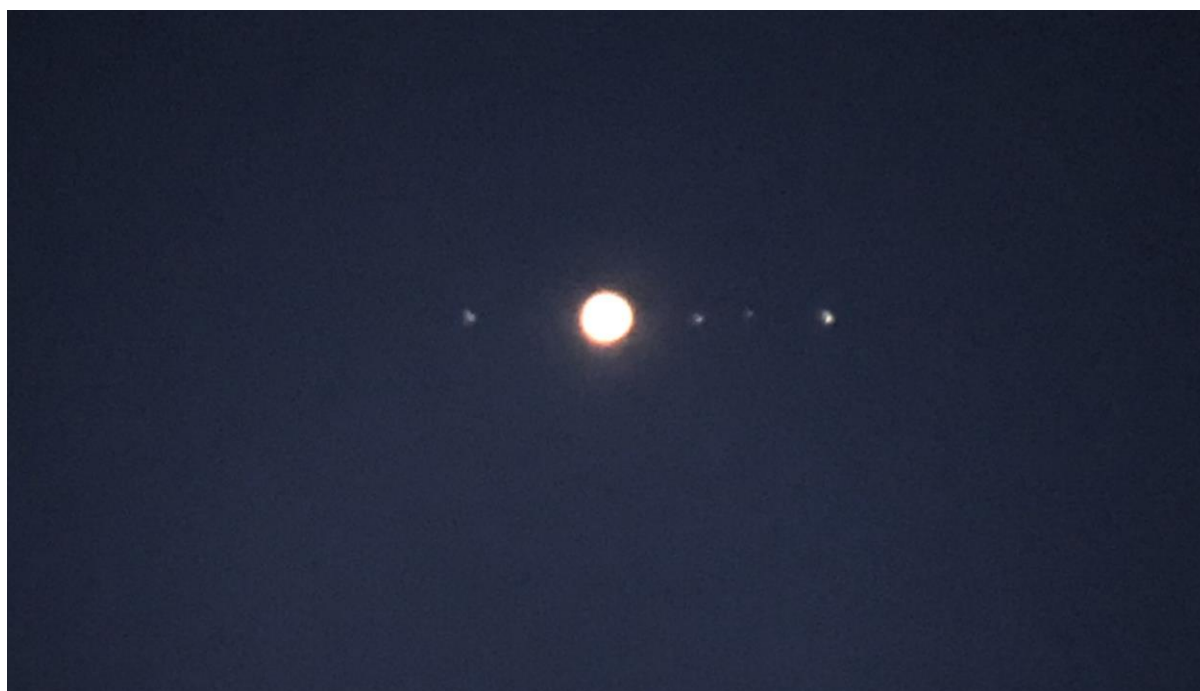
One of 34 Stone Curlews in the Brecks today

Onto the forest next and a speculative hour scanning the treetops for raptors. Buzzards were quite active, and we even spotted the tiny distant dot of a song-flighting **Woodlark** above the trees. It was very pleasant in the warm sunshine out of the wind, and things got even better when a large flat-

winged raptor suddenly floated up on a thermal above the woods – it was a young **Goshawk**, and the light was superb as we scoped the bird for a minute circling round, before it closed its wings and plummeted into the forest again. On to Swaffham Forest next and we walked a couple of rides to check clearings for Woodlark and Great Grey Shrike, without success. A handful of **Brambling** were all we had to show for our efforts here.

Lunch was enjoyed at Lynford where we utilised one of the picnic tables in the beautifully sheltered car park. We could hear lots of **Siskins** about and afterwards we took a walk down to the lake where we found the flock of at least 200 birds feeding on small cones on the conifer trees. As we scanned through them, one or two **Lesser Redpolls** were seen including a lovely raspberry red male. Down at the paddocks, we didn't find any Hawfinch but did see plenty of other birds – about twenty nice **Redwings** perching up in the trees in the sunshine, and 18 **Brambling** coming out in dribs and drabs from the hornbeams and calling. A **Marsh Tit** showed very well briefly in the hedge beside us too, and we also noted Goldcrest, Coal Tit, Mistle Thrush and Great-spotted Woodpecker.

We ended the day all the way back up on the coast at Holkham, where we wanted to capitalise on the fine evening to watch for Pinkfeet coming to roost. We walked to Washington Hide and positioned ourselves there around 5pm, and waited. The sky briefly went orange to the west as the sun began to set, and we noted two **Great White Egrets**, huge flocks of Starlings, a perched **Green Woodpecker** and then, eventually, geese! Around 7-8k **Pink-footed Geese** arrived to roost from the south-west, providing a spectacle that was backed up by **Venus**, **Jupiter** and four of its moons, and then **Saturn** complete with rings! A fantastic way to end any day!



Jupiter and moons – a great end to the day!

FRIDAY 29TH OCTOBER – *Strong Southerly winds and rain showers, 12C*

Our final day morning of the trip was spent on a wild goose chase in West Norfolk, trying to get to grips with some of the feeding **Pinkfeet**. With around 20,000 birds in the Holkham roost at the moment, we were hoping to find some decent numbers on the deck and headed to a spot where we'd seen beet being loaded a couple of days prior. Sure enough there were about 2500 **Pink-footed Geese** visible here, with doubtless more over the brow of the field. We found a good spot and spent

a while scanning through them. We didn't find anything unusual, but it was good to practice separating the young birds – some still very small and dinky, with soft, almost fluffy belly plumage – from their attendant parents. At one point something flushed the flock from over the hill and a mass of birds came in and settled in front of us at our end of the field – a really spectacular sight and sound! Next we headed a bit further west to another field of beet tops, getting a quick look through around 4000 birds before they were flushed by the farmer. This sent them to join more birds resting on winter wheat about a mile away and we knew they wouldn't be allowed to settle there for very long! Sure enough we just got there and got ourselves set up when another farmer appeared and flushed the whole lot. Spectacular to see, but frustrating that the birds can't settle anywhere to feed. We returned to the beet field and had another go at those birds, but gave up when they too took to the air – the joys of goose watching in the early part of the season, when beet tops are still at a premium and farmers are trying to keep the birds off other crops!



Pink-footed Geese on the move, 29th October

Dropping down to the coast we headed along to Wells, and had a short walk in the woods which were predictably very quite in the strong winds. Wells harbour channel was more productive though with a really close **Red-throated Diver**, and large numbers of **Brent Geese** feeding there. Waders included hundreds of Oystercatchers, and a few **Bar-tailed Godwits**, Curlew, Redshank, Turnstone, Dunlin, **Knot**, **Grey Plover**, Sanderling and Ringed Plover too. From here it was lunch, then back to Great Ryburgh and on to King's Lynn for drop-offs.

Systematic List

Brent Goose
Canada Goose
Greylag Goose
Pink-footed Goose
Mute Swan
Egyptian Goose
Shelduck
Shoveler
Gadwall
Wigeon
Mallard
Pintail
Teal
Velvet Scoter
Common Scoter
Red-breasted Merganser
Mandarin
Red-legged Partridge
Grey Partridge
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Grey Heron
Great White Egret
Little Egret
Gannet
Cormorant
Sparrowhawk
Marsh Harrier
Red Kite
Common Buzzard
Goshawk
Water Rail (H)
Moorhen
Coot
Common Crane
Stone Curlew
Oystercatcher
Avocet
Lapwing
Golden Plover
Grey Plover
Ringed Plover
Curlew
Bar-tailed Godwit
Black-tailed Godwit
Turnstone
Knot

Ruff
Sanderling
Dunlin
Little Stint
Common Snipe
Grey Phalarope
Green Sandpiper
Common Redshank
Spotted Redshank
Black-headed Gull
Mediterranean Gull
Common Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Caspian Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Guillemot
Razorbill
Stock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Barn Owl
Tawny Owl (H)
Little Owl
Short-eared Owl
Great-spotted Woodpecker
Green Woodpecker
Kestrel
Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Raven
Coal Tit
Marsh Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Bearded Tit (H)
Skylark
Woodlark
Shorelark
Swallow
Cetti's Warbler (H)
Chiffchaff
Blackcap (H)
Goldcrest
Wren
Nuthatch (H)

Treecreeper (H)
Starling
Blackbird
Redwing
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Robin
Stonechat
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Dunnock
Grey Wagtail
Pied Wagtail
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Water Pipit
Chaffinch
Brambling
Bullfinch (H)
Linnet
Lesser Redpoll
Goldfinch
Siskin
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting
Snow Bunting

Total species 126