



**TOUR REPORT**  
**DURHAM & NORTHUMBERLAND**  
**10<sup>TH</sup> – 16<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2022**

[www.oriolobirding.com](http://www.oriolobirding.com)

[info@oriolobirding.com](mailto:info@oriolobirding.com)

**Monday October 10<sup>th</sup>:** The 2022 North East Oriole tour was underway following a post lunch meet up at our first base the Bowburn Hotel, ideally located just south of Durham City. A mid-afternoon visit was made to the RSPB Saltholme reserve on the North Tees marshes. There was a distinct autumnal feel in the air as flocks of Lapwings and Golden Plover took flight, nervous no doubt due to the presence of a Peregrine and two hunting Marsh Harriers. A recent discovery on the reserve had been a visitor from the Americas in the form of a Lesser Yellowlegs. However, it was not to be found at its favoured marsh and we discovered to late, as the reserve closed, that it had relocated to another pool! So, something to aim for in the morning.

**Tuesday October 11<sup>th</sup>:**

Phil Stead was the founder of the Teesmouth Bird Club and he has a hide named in his honour at the entrance to the RSPB Saltholme reserve. It was from here that we planned to start our second day on Teesside. But again, no yellowlegs, it had just flown off again, so we decided to play it cool and enjoy the day. Our walk out from the rather splendid visitor centre led us to a mixed bird flock which contained Goldcrests and 2 Chiffchaffs. No less than six Stonechats graced the rough meadows surrounding an area aptly named the “wet grassland”. Here to our pleasant surprise the yellowlegs had relocated itself and the bird kindly dropped onto a pool not far from the path. The Saltholme Pools hide lies adjacent to the most productive part of the reserve and overlooks both West Saltholme and Back Saltholme Pools. These former wet field flashes have gradually expanded over the years to become important sanctuary on the edge of the Seal Sands National Nature Reserve. With the help of some local knowledge, we picked out a juvenile Spoonbill and a wing tagged Marsh Harrier, which originated from a ringing scheme based in Norfolk. Back at the reserve centre we took our lunch and also enjoyed some excellent close-up views of the Lesser Yellowlegs which, by now, had returned to the pool in front of the Phil Stead hide. In the afternoon we headed out to the famous Seal Sands Estuary and walked both banks of the Greatham Creek. A surprise bird here was a lost looking Long tailed Duck which had taken to the tidal pools which lie in the marshes adjacent to the creek. There was quite a lot of local interest in this bird and social media later contained many images of the bird which appeared to be a juvenile. Numerous wildfowl comprised mainly Wigeon but we did pick out 8 Pintail amongst the flocks. These flocks were scattered by the antics of some young Marsh Harriers which turned their attention onto a juvenile Peregrine. The Peregrine had been perched quietly on a fencepost minding its own business! A slight detour on the way back to our hotel took Andrew on a trip down memory lane to his days as a student in Durham.

**Wednesday October 12<sup>th</sup>:** We ventured to the south bank of the Tees this morning in search of more ducks. The Redcar seafront was already familiar to some of the group as we viewed the windfarm which lies close offshore. Soon we came across our quarry as George picked out a young Velvet Scoter complete with its distinctive head pattern. Small numbers of Eider bobbed around on a slightly choppy sea and this area can hold them in good numbers. Other new birds for the trip included Red throated Diver off which there were several. The wind was a fresh south westerly and these winds would dominate the week along with prolonged spells of autumn sunshine. We took our lunch again back at RSPB Saltholme whilst the leader managed to pinch John W's sandwiches but he took it well! A sizeable flock of Barnacle Geese grazed the reserve marshes, these are birds which now breed in East Anglia and winter at Teesmouth. Several skeins of Pink footed Geese flew south high above the reserve, no doubt heading in the opposite direction to the Barnacle Geese. Hartlepool Headland is another of those must visit birding locations on the north east itinerary. Also famous for its military history and the hanging of a monkey as a French spy! Landscaped gardens provide shelter for migrant birds that have just crossed the grey North Sea. Our focus though was on the shoreline where Rock Pipits foraged amongst the wave washed seaweed. The headland is also a

regular wintering site for Purple Sandpipers and we found a few birds on the rising tide. Offshore it was interesting to observe an adult Puffin feeding. These birds should be well out at sea by now but we would see more off the Northumberland coast later in the tour. Perhaps they are finding good feeding in the inshore waters this autumn?

**Thursday October 13<sup>th</sup>:** Today was moving on day and we headed north to the Durham coast at South Shields. The beach by the pier is favoured by small numbers of Snow Buntings in winter. We had heard that a small flock of five birds had already returned to the shoreline here. It was a bright and breezy morning and the beach was more than popular so locating the buntings proved difficult. Right on cue the flock flew directly over our heads and continued off along the coast! A White Wagtail was picked out foraging on the newly swept beach amongst a flock of mixed Meadow Pipits and Pied Wagtails. John B was happy as we crossed to the north bank of the Tyne for the first time. The Northumberland coast at Newbiggin by the Sea was our next port of call. Newbiggin has become another well-known birding location in recent years, particularly for its seabird observations. More Puffins were observed close inshore alongside the more familiar, at this time of year, Red throated Divers. A flock of 300 Golden Plover roosted on the rocks at low tide and small flocks of Sanderlings fed along the tideline. Once again, we picked out the odd Purple Sandpiper amongst the rocks. Next stop was Druridge Bay and a visit to Cresswell Pond Northumberland Wildlife Trust Reserve. The previous day a Collared Pratincole had dropped in for a brief stop and funnily enough we had bumped into the birds finder on the pier at South Shields earlier in the day. Then a short while later news came through that the pratincole had turned up at RSPB Saltholme, talk about sliding doors. More local information was passed on in the hide, a lingering juvenile Hobby was showing well just up the road. As we drove into Druridge Bay Country Park we picked up the Hobby as it flew low over the access road ahead of us. Pulling over we all jumped out and obtained some great views as the bird pursued Migrant Hawker dragonflies. A great end to the day as we enjoyed the late autumn sunshine. All to soon it was time to check in at our next base, the Amble Inn in Amble!

**Friday October 14<sup>th</sup>:** The weather broke a bit this morning and we saw the expected rain. This worked in our favour as we arrived on Holy Island as flocks of Redwings dropped from the skies into the village gardens. Several hundred birds were counted and it was our first taste of east coast “fall” conditions. Later we tracked down an elusive Yellow-browed Warbler in gardens near the harbour. In between we enjoyed the views back to the mainland over St Cuthberts Island. The flats here held good numbers of Pale bellied Brent Geese and smaller numbers of Dark-bellied Brents. Both forms overwinter here the Pale bellied birds originating from breeding grounds on Svalbard and north east Greenland and the Dark bellied Brents from northern Russia. After lunch we crossed the causeway to the mainland and re-visited the coastal dunes at Cheswick. Earlier we had made an attempt to locate the Black Scoter which had returned to the Northumbrian coast for yet another winter. It had been reported daily off the beach at Cocklawburn prior to our visit. It proved to be a tricky bird to pick out amongst the scoter flock. In a great team effort, we managed to pick out this distinctive, though distant, scoter with a “belisha beacon” like beak. A drake Scaup also accompanied the scoter flock and thus also made it onto our trip list.

**Saturday October 15<sup>th</sup>:** The day started with heavy rain so we popped along the road to the Hauxley reserve which offered shelter in the form of hides and a new visitor centre. As the rain eased, we edged our way along the trail to the Ponteland Hide. A bird flock here contained a prize in the form of a Willow Tit which we all obtained good views of. Cetti’s Warblers were in full voice and one did pop up briefly for a quick view. These birds appear to follow you around and as such exact numbers are hard to determine. Further along Siskins called overhead and Keith picked out a lone Brambling feeding in a trackside sycamore. In Autumn these trees provide a ready supply of aphids to hungry migrants, finches, buntings and warblers alike.



The plan today had been to visit Beadnell Bay and as the weather cleared, we headed north. Although the wind remained blustery the clearing skies enticed us to venture across the dunes to the Long Nanny Burn. Here a friend from Spurn, Jonnie Fisk, had located a Pectoral Sandpiper and another friend, Dave from Wakefield, was fortunately watching it as we arrived! The sandpiper fed on its own on the edge of the saltmarsh and gave very nice views through the scopes, our second Yankee wader of the trip, all stripes but no stars!

Turning our attention to the saltmarsh Ann picked out a couple of Twite feeding on the ground. There were four of these attractive “curry faced” finches to be found the forerunners of a hundred strong flock which regularly winters here. Jonnie had also found a Richard’s Pipit in the dunes back towards High Newton but it was a tricky ask to relocate it amongst the long dune grasses. However, Diana did manage to pick out a couple of Grey Partridges on the edge of the stubble field.



**Sunday October 16<sup>th</sup>:** The final day of the tour was soon upon us as we enjoyed a final breakfast at the Amble Inn. The winds had picked up again overnight and the grey skies presented another challenge. A short while later we were stood at the roadside at Widdrington overlooking a lake

rolling in “white horses”. Not deterred the resident Red-necked Grebe was out there riding the surf. Despite the conditions everyone obtained good views.

The previous evening, we had received a tip off about a Grey Phalarope at Newbiggin, we had already tried and failed to see this bird earlier in the week. However, the change in the winds meant the bird had changed its habits. A short while later we were all on the beach watching this rather diminutive ocean-going wader. It happily rode the wave crests as it fed busily only a short distance offshore in the main bay in Newbiggin. In timely fashion the Maritime Institute opened its doors and we enjoyed a last hot coffee together in the comfortable and rather fascinating surroundings of this recently established community venture. All too soon we were back on the road and homeward bound after what had been an exhilarating week of great birds and a fond return to familiar places.