



**TOUR REPORT**  
**DURHAM & NORTHUMBERLAND**  
**14<sup>TH</sup> – 19<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2024**

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**Monday October 14<sup>th</sup>:** At the start of our NE tour the group congregated at the by now familiar Bowburn Hotel on the outskirts of Durham City. The first point of call was Hartlepool Headland on what was a sunny and slightly breezy afternoon. A brisk walk around the well-known migrant hotspots the Borough Hall trees and the Croft Gardens revealed a paucity of birds however we did dig out a couple of Chiffchaffs and a few Robins. We made the obligatory visit to the Andy Capp statue and the monument to the poor French monkey hanged as a spy by enraged locals. The headland has suffered from foreign navies in its history but today all the firepower on show at the Heugh Battery are to remind us of the past. On the rocks between the breakwaters roosting waders included 200+ Oystercatchers half a dozen Turnstone and 5 Curlew. No sign yet of the Purple Sandpipers which is a regular winter visitor to this spot but a bird that we would catch up with later in the tour.



**Tuesday October 15<sup>th</sup>:** Following a leisurely breakfast the group left just after 8 am and headed to Hurworth Burn Reservoir near Trimdon. This is a regular haunt of the rapidly disappearing Willow Tit which appear at the feeding stations found along east bank. It was still a bit early in the Autumn for the feeders to be stocked so we located passing tit flocks in the hope of catching up with our target bird. As we walked along on what was best described as a cloudy day several small flocks of Redwings dropped out of the sky, part of a widespread influx along the east coast. Several Jays to were on the move and Chaffinches were also in evidence. Towards the end of our stay, we did find a vocal Willow Tit which sadly stubbornly remained hidden in the vegetation. Unlike its cousin Coal Tit Great and Blue Tits all of which responded well and came out of covert and show well for the group. Additional sightings on the mornings walk included Goldcrest, Treecreeper and several Reed Buntings whilst the reservoir held both Little and Great crested Grebes a large flock of Wigeon and a flock of Lapwings fed in the adjacent fields.

Our next venue was the RSPB reserve at Saltholme, Teesmouth which had just celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> birthday after its first opening in 2009. A short walk out to the Saltholme Pools hide was thought to be the most productive option and after some refreshment in the centre café we set off in that direction. Four Stonechats graced the bramble patches along the way as they popped in and out of view. From the hide itself new birds came thick and fast with a feeding Spoonbill, a Great White Egret amongst several adult Little Egrets, 5 Pintail flew in with a wigeon flock and we obtained



excellent scope views of the birds in their eclipse plumage. Several wader species could be found including Redshank, Dunlin plus several Black tailed Godwits.

Back at the centre we took our picnic lunch at the Phil Stead hide, Phil was the founder of the Teesmouth Bird Club, and the hide situated near the reserve entrance was named after him in his honour. Mid-afternoon, on what still a typically grey northeast day, we found ourselves at the mouth of the Tees Estuary at Seaton Snook. As the tide raced in hundreds of shore birds were gathering producing an exciting spectacle. A quick scan and count produced 400 Golden Plover, a dozen Grey Plover, 21 Bar tailed Godwits, small numbers of Knot, Ringed Plover and Dunlin and a group of 14 busy Sanderling graced the beach. Offshore in Tees Bay we picked out 3 or 4 Red throated Diver one of which was an adult still in summer plumage.

The day ended nearby on Seaton Common which produced several Song Thrushes and Blackbirds and another half a dozen stonechats. However, it proved to be a “no show” from the expected Short eared Owls, maybe it was too gloomy for them today!

### **Wednesday October 16<sup>th</sup>**

*wet with SE wind rain all day*

The day started wet and continued to be very wet all day and it was still dark as we took our breakfast at the hotel. The plan was to head off inland for an exploration of Weardale and Upper Teesdale and our first stop was the Low Barns DWT reserve in Witton le Wear. Here as we stood in the car park a few redwings appeared out of the gloom and spirits were lifted as we heard about a Hawfinch 10 mins away in Bishop Auckland no doubt arriving with the redwings. However heavy rain continued, and we tried viewing from the hides which produced a modest mix of wildfowl. At the feeding station two Marsh Tits entertained the group but the Willow Tits are now more irregular in their appearances.



Moving on we headed along the valley in Upper Weardale before dropping over into Teesdale at Langdon Beck the traditional site for Black Grouse. Sure, enough there they were braving the weather to feed in the roadside meadows which they favour. We counted at least thirty birds including a few greyhens amongst the males. The males stay faithful to their favourite feeding spots which are

usually located to the lekking area. Later we took lunch in the shelter of the Bowless Visitor centre where a Nuthatch entertained on the bird feeders. Given the proximity of the two most famous waterfalls in the North Pennines we ventured first down to Low Force which was impressive enough. However, it was totally eclipsed by the wondrous spectacle on view at High Force, with the River Tees in full spate after a night and day of heavy rain. It was simply breathtaking to stand up close as the raging peaty waters spouted over the Win Sill lip.



Heading back over the misty tops towards Weardale we spotted another 8 Black Grouse in a roadside field. These rather confiding birds allowed for prolonged views through the scopes whilst the only Buzzard of the day braved the wet conditions. Onwards we continued over Bollinghope Common to spot some Red Grouse with good success. Before too long we were ascending to the A68 at a gloomy Tow Law and back to the Bowburn for our final evening.

**Thursday October 17<sup>th</sup>.**

*blowy SW winds but mild with some sunshine*

After leaving Bowburn, where the local Tawny Owls had called through the night, we weaved our way to the coast at South Shields and parked at the coastal leas. A Yellow-browed Warbler had been discovered the previous evening which suggested it might be a good place to start the day. However perhaps it had moved on as there was no sign of it on this bright and sunny morning. A good scour around Trow Quarry revealed a few migrants present namely Robins and Dunnocks, Blackcap and a Chiffchaff and a few Blackbirds but not quite that for which we had hoped.

So, continuing northbound we passed through the Tyne Tunnel and onwards through Whitley Bay. Our destination here was St Mary's Island, a familiar sight for fans of "Vera." Here a group of local volunteers manage a small wetland nature reserve with an impressive bird list. We picked out a few Wigeon and Pintail but the main spectacle was to be found on the seafront where thousands of waders gathered at high tide. Over 2000 Golden Plover contained a few Grey Plovers, Redshanks and Bar-tailed Godwits but the Purple Sandpipers still eluded us. Offshore small numbers of Common



Scoter passed by but back at the wetland another Yellow browed Warbler proved to elusive for us. The following day Holy Island was on the Oriole itinerary.



**Friday October 18<sup>th</sup>.** *A calm but cloudy morning then glorious sunshine in the afternoon*

Up at 0700 and off to Holy Island timing our arrival as the causeway opened just after 8am. It was a magical experience watching the sunrise over the mudflats with a full moon dropping over the goose filled fields inland. Early morning flights of Barnacle Geese passed by a small herd of Whooper Swans whilst dainty Little Egrets danced along the creeks. An array of shorebirds gleamed in the sunshine. Greenshank, Grey Plover, Redshanks and Bar tailed Godwits.

Onto the island heading for the Vicarage with its stunning views across Fenham Flats which held countless numbers of Pale-bellied Brent Geese. Lindisfarne is the winter home to most of the Svalbard population of brents. Meanwhile we suffered another futile pursuit of an elusive Yellow browed Warbler, the windy conditions did not help and seemingly all the Yellow brows stayed in cover during the day only to reappear on the following calmer morn! We persisted and dug out the odd Chiffchaff and a few smart Redwings as we walked a circuit via harbour, the islands castle then returning along the Crooked Lonnen back to the village. Today there was only a small tide window and we had to be off the island before the afternoon high tide.

Heading back down the A1 we grabbed some well-earned hot food at the Purdy services. From here a short drive back to coast brought us to Bamburgh and the famous Stag Rocks. The name derives from a small white stag painted rather crudely on the seafront rocks here. Spending the afternoon, we familiarised ourselves with the local Eiders and also the Common Scoter flocks offshore which held some Velvet Scoters. On the rocks below finally a roosting flock of Purple Sandpipers provided the group with some long-awaited views. Nearby Budle Bay was full of Barnacle Geese whilst in the mouth of the bay we picked out a Red-necked Grebe amongst the Red-throated Divers. Best of all the day ended with wonderful views of a confiding Snow Bunting on the beach, the bird literally walking around our feet!

Back in Rothbury we enjoyed a wonderful evening meal at the recently opened Bewick Rooms.

## Saturday October 19<sup>th</sup>

Away after breakfast to the coast at Druridge Bay starting the birding day at Newbiggin by the sea.

Sizeable number of Mediterranean Gulls could be found in the bay and feeding on the beach.

Watching the bay from Church Point there were Little Gulls feeding offshore unusual for this time of year. A walk was taken along the clifftop to Beacon Point where local birders put out seed for finches and buntings. Today we found a nice flock of Linnets and a group of Rooks pinching the seed! A flock of Meadow Pipits on the rocks held the odd Rock Pipit whilst waders included several hundred Golden Plover and the usual Bar – tailed Godwits.

Back in the town we enjoyed a coffee break at the Maritime Mission a busy community hub on the seafront. Last time I was here with an Oriole group a Grey Phalarope fed amongst the breakers.

Today news broke of a potential American White winged Scoter off Bamburgh with the Velvet Scoters we had been watching the previous day!

It took a good 45 mins to head back up the coast and back to the now familiar top car park along the Wyndings. Sure, enough the bird was still there with a group of half a dozen Velvet Scoter allowing for favourable comparison. As the ducks were feeding a good mile offshore, we took our time to enjoy the spectacle and study the birds. The mix of drake Velvet Scoters all exhibited a slightly different amount of white around the eye. Their American cousin showed a conspicuously white patch. With patience the subtlety different head shape could also be made out which gave the White-winged Scoter a distinctive appearance. Other species included more Little gulls, an Arctic Skua as well as both Common and Arctic Terns, what a brilliant place and what a terrific way to bring the tour to a finale. A final night was spent on the coast at Amble before the group dispersed homewards.





