

# Limosa

**BirdWalk #105 | Morston Quay to Stiffkey Fen Tuesday 26th February 2019**

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**Morston Quay to Stiffkey Fen, Norfolk  
Tuesday 26 February 2019 (13:30-17:30hrs)  
Leaders: Brian Small, Barbara & Chris Kightley and David Walsh**



*We had superb views of flocks of Brent Geese as they flew over to feed in the fields © Brian Small, Limosa*

A February day that was really cricket weather rather than football, followed the pattern of sunny *BirdWalks* from 2018. Continuing the football analogy, it was a walk of two halves, mostly because we walked from Morston Quay to Stiffkey Fen and then back again, but also as there was no doubt that the warmth of the early afternoon had sadly gone by late afternoon and was much cooler as we returned for coffees and cakes – no sub to run on with water or half oranges, I'm afraid. We also had the great company of new signing David Walsh, wearing the Limosa colours for the first time – he was even capped! Anyway, enough football (Eds)...

Late February 2019 will be remembered for the record-breaking temperatures and as we gathered in the car park it was hard to know what to wear. T-shirts seemed appropriate, incredibly, but most dressed sensibly – the talk of swimming costumes was looked down upon. There was even a (well-planned) flypast of Tornados for those that had arrived early to enjoy lunch by the estuary. Besides the welcoming chatter – it had been over six months since the last walk, so we had plenty of catching up to do – the estuary resounded with the song of Skylarks and evocative Eurasian Curlews, plus calling Redshanks and chuntering Brent Geese. In some ways the weather was almost too good, with quite a heat haze...

With the teamsheets complete - all present and correct – we set to viewing the broad band of saltmarsh from the car park, looking out towards Blakeney Point, across the River Glaven. Besides the Brents and Curlews, now-common Little Egrets fed and the lispings call of Rock Pipits came from two birds present by the quay. Teal fed in the channel with Oystercatchers; a pair of Kestrels sat atop a boat's mast; Dunnocks and Wrens sang and flitted about the *suaeda*; whilst from the village behind Blackbirds sang and the first of many Buzzards soared, being mobbed by Jackdaws. The aforementioned heat haze almost caused us to miss one of the best birds of the walk, when a small raptor was found sat low in the marshes: with careful manoeuvring to get the best view the debate about its identity was settled – a male Merlin! Superb, though a slightly soft-focus look, I'm afraid.

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Finally, we began to walk west along the Norfolk Coast Path, the pair of Kestrels following us as we headed to the bank and at times perching next to each other, giving a lovely view through the 'scopes. Greenfinches and Linnets sat in trees by Mussels Lane and a couple of Long-tailed Tits sneaked about the brambles, finally showing better in some willows with a Chaffinch for company. Out on the marsh we again watched small groups of Teal, a male Reed Bunting that perched up briefly, and a male Marsh Harrier – distant at first – drifted by as we walked.

The hedgerows attracted another Kestrel plus at least one Yellowhammer and several Reed Buntings joined it in the bushes. Where the flowering gorse bushes ended, we were forced to make a slight detour to avoid the mud, but in doing so very much enjoyed a pair of Stonechats, the male just beginning to wear into its full black-headed breeding plumage and both closely watched by a Magpie. Over the fields yet more Skylarks sang and over the saltmarsh at least two male Marsh Harriers were now feeding with one dropping down then lifting off with an item of prey.

Upon reaching the small collection of boats that look out across Stiffkey Freshes into Blakeney Harbour, we closely scrutinised the large flocks of wildfowl, gulls and waders on the mud and shingle. The wildfowl included many Brent Geese, which occasionally would fly off just over our heads into the fields behind calling as they went; smaller numbers of Wigeon and Teal plus plenty of Shelduck were scattered across the mud, where a pair of Pintail was found by David. Best though were the Red-breasted Mergansers out in the harbour, which even from a distance were sleek and shaggy crested. Gulls were predominantly Black-headed with much lower numbers of Common and Great Black-backed; a few Herring and one Lesser Black-backed Gull were also seen. A calling Mediterranean Gull was eventually found: a preening adult, with white wings, scarlet bill and black hood just forming. Waders were a little distant, though we got fair views of closer Lapwings, Oystercatchers, 20 Black-tailed Godwits, a couple of Grey Plover and Turnstones, but the very distant flock of Dunlin and Knot were mere white specks and best left ignored...



*A muddy billed, sunlit Redshank as it reflects on life and whether to fly off – which it did! © Brian Small, Limosa*

Heading the last 400 metres to Stiffkey Fen allowed stunning views of Avocets and Redshanks on the close mud with the sun behind us, before we lifted onto the bank from which to look into Stiffkey Fen. We were greeted by a very busy, reed-fringed pool alive with wildfowl, but also a small variety of shorebirds. Wigeon, Teal, Pintail, Gadwall, Shoveler and Mallard were dwarfed by the gaggles of Greylags, seemingly busy preparing to roost. Smaller numbers of Pochard and Tufted Ducks dived about the deeper areas of water, whilst six Ruff weaved in and out of the ducks along a shallower stretch alongside several Lapwings. A Snipe called as it flew across the fen, landing at the far side, before running into cover; at least two Moorhens picked about near the far reeds; closer, but especially elusive, was a pair of Bearded Tits that kept on flitting across the reed tops only to dive in as soon as they were called out! Just east of the fen, in a tilled field, we picked out a couple each of Stock Dove and Hare.

Finally, it was time to walk back; the warm weather had left us parched, so most put their head down and reached the car park in good time. Others had been more attentive and seen a Barn Owl – though luckily this was refound out over the marsh as we enjoyed our coffees and cake, looking out towards Blakeney Point as the sun dropped. During extra time, a calling Greenshank flew into the creek and showed before flying off, then as the final whistle sounded, that was it. Game over!

**BIRD LIST (n=70)**

Brent Goose – many 100s on or over the saltmarsh, mudflats and fields – race *bernicla* Dark-belled Brent  
Greylag Goose – some noisy (and some not so noisy) flocks seen  
Mute Swan – on Stiffkey Fen  
Shelduck – many scattered about the saltmarsh and mudflats  
Shoveler – seen feeding on Stiffkey Fen  
Gadwall – c. 25 on Stiffkey Fen  
Wigeon – several small flocks in flight; a flock of 20 gathered on the flats and others on Stiffkey Fen  
Mallard – a handful on Stiffkey Fen  
Pintail – two out on Stiffkey Freshes and plenty on Stiffkey Fen  
Teal – many 100 on the flats on Blakeney Harbour and more on Stiffkey Fen  
Tufted Duck – eight Stiffkey Fen  
Common Pochard – six on Stiffkey Fen  
Red-breasted Merganser – seven were seen somewhat distantly in Blakeney Harbour  
Little Grebe – seen on the creek leading to Stiffkey Freshes  
Pheasant – several about the fields  
Little Egret – many feeding on the saltmarsh or along ditches – now the most common heron in the UK  
Great Cormorant – several in flight  
Marsh Harrier – at least two males and two female/immatures over the saltmarsh  
Common Buzzard – now very numerous with eight seen on one scan of the distant horizon at one point  
Coot – Seen on Stiffkey Fen  
Moorhen – two on Stiffkey Fen  
Oystercatcher – several scattered out over the flats at Blakeney Harbour  
Avocet – two on the mud at Freshes Creek; several on Stiffkey Fen  
Lapwing – many seen in flight or settled on Stiffkey Fen  
Grey Plover – two closer birds seen notably in Blakeney Harbour but others distantly  
Black-tailed Godwit – one group of 20 or so on the marshes  
Snipe – one flew over Stiffkey Fen  
Curlew – seen feeding or displaying on the saltmarsh and mudflats  
Ruff – six on Stiffkey Fen  
Greenshank – one came in at the final whistle near Morston Quay  
Common Redshank – many about the muddy creeks and marshes  
Turnstone – small numbers at Stiffkey Freshes  
Knot – seen distantly by some out near Blakeney Harbour  
Dunlin – one distant flock at Blakeney Harbour  
Black-headed Gull – one large flock out on Stiffkey Freshes and others displaying about the marsh  
Mediterranean Gull – an adult in the gull flock at Freshes Creek  
Common Gull – fair numbers about Freshes Creek  
Great Black-backed Gull – up to 25 on Stiffkey Freshes  
Herring Gull – many seen about the marsh and a handful gathered with other gulls on the Freshes  
Lesser Black-backed Gull – only one  
Barn Owl – one was seen over the fields then the marshes just west of Morston  
Wood Pigeon – many flying about as they gathered to roost  
Stock Dove – two singles in flight and maybe the same in field near Stiffkey Fen  
Collared Dove – two about the building at Morston  
Kestrel – a pair sat about boat masts and signs near Morston Quay  
Merlin – a male was found perched on bushes on the saltmarsh before flying off  
Magpie – several about the fields west of Morston  
Jackdaw – seen near Morston

Rook – ones or twos distantly over the fields to the south  
Carrion Crow – several about the fields and over the marsh  
Blue Tit – several seen scattered about the hedges or gorse  
Skylark – many in song seen in flight over the saltmarsh and fields  
Long-tailed Tit – two in brambles by the bank west of the car park  
Wren – heard and seen only briefly  
Bearded Tit – two or three in reeds at Stiffkey Fen  
Starling – lots about the hedges and then gathering in preparation to roost  
Blackbird – quite a few in the hedges  
Song Thrush – one singing near the car park as we were about to leave  
Robin – several seen or heard ticking or singing in the hedges  
Stonechat – a pair was seen along hedgerows  
Dunnock – seen and heard in the hedges and gorse  
Pied Wagtail – seen well at Morston Quay with two about the picnic tables and boats  
Meadow Pipit – a few seen as they flew over the saltmarsh  
Rock Pipit – seen and heard briefly about the boats and saltmarsh  
Chaffinch – one in a tree with Long-tailed Tits and other flew over  
Greenfinch – seen in trees near the car park  
Linnet – several flocks noted and seen well in the gorse  
Goldfinch – a small group in flight overhead early in the walk  
Yellowhammer – five, including two males, along the hedgerows  
Reed Bunting – several seen in the saltmarsh or with Yellowhammers

#### **MAMMALS**

Rabbit  
Hare  
Grey Seal



*Who could resist one more photo of the groups of Brents taking off and passing overhead? © Brian Small, Limosa*