

Norfolk Brecks:

Goshawks & Hawfinches (1) Mon 27th Feb-Thu 1st March 2012



*Trip photos (clockwise from top): It was third time lucky with **Firecrest** - but well worth the wait as this photograph taken on tour clearly shows! • We enjoyed great views of up to a dozen **Hawfinches**, perched in the lower branches of the trees or feeding on the ground at Lynford • Despite a foggy start for our **group beside the river Little Ouse** at Santon Downham, a varied selection of birds seen there included Little Grebe, Water Rail, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Siskin • **Crossbills** seemed to be present just about everywhere in the forest this week! © all photos Gary Elton / Limosa except for group photo © tour participant Jo Latham/www.wildlifephotocards.co.uk*

report compiled by tour leader:
Gary Elton

Trip Diary

Tour Leader: Gary Elton

with Phil Austin, Charles Gordon, Lois Le Lacheur, Jo Latham and John Roots

Day 1: Mon 27th February

After a very enjoyable evening meal and opportunity to get to know each other, we discussed the trips plans before retiring to bed full of expectations for the days ahead.

Day 2: Tue 28th February

We woke to a cloudy but dry day and, after a hearty breakfast, drove the short distance to our first stop, Lynford Arboretum. The visit here was planned to be brief, as a pre-breakfast sortie by Gary had revealed a singing Firecrest right by the entrance and we naturally hoped to drive up, see it and drive off again... Unfortunately life is never that simple and the bird could not be relocated. Consolation came in the form of a Nuthatch on a nearby bird table, plus a good number of Siskins and several Crossbills; these latter two species being seen seemingly continually over the forthcoming days.

A short drive followed by a gentle twenty-five minute walk took us to our next site in search of another of our target birds: Goshawk. With conditions unfortunately not really ideal, we spent the next hour or so hopefully scanning the sky... then *bingo!* A Goshawk flew across the tree-line in front of us. Rather brief but still a reasonable view, and most importantly the bird was seen by everyone. Several singing Woodlarks were also heard during our stay, and Yellowhammers regularly appeared on top of the nearby smaller conifers. We walked back enjoying more good views of several more Crossbills and two Lesser Redpolls, one a cracking male, in the tree tops by the path.

Next stop, Cavenham for lunch. We scanned the heathland, enjoying good views of the large numbers of Fieldfares and Redwings that were feeding on the ground, their numbers boosted by an estimated 100 Meadow Pipits in amongst them. A Woodlark could be heard singing nearby and, after lunch, we drove back along the track to see if we could find the bird. Disembarking, the bird was spied sitting on the ground only fifty or so yards away; it flew off, but fortunately landed again in a tree just a short distance away, enabling us to enjoy good views through telescopes.

Our final destination of the day was the Suffolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Lackford Lakes. Here we spent a couple of hours walking round the reserve, viewing the lakes from the well positioned hides. Birds of note included five Common Snipe and a smart drake Goosander, plus a selection of commoner wildfowl and gulls.

Day 3: Wed 29th February

We awoke to another grey and cloudy day. Unperturbed, after a slightly earlier breakfast today, we again headed to the nearby arboretum, arriving there just after 8 o'clock. As luck wouldn't have it, yesterday's Firecrest eluded us yet again, and a second potential territory also yielded nothing. There were plenty of other distractions however, with noisy over flying Siskins and a small flock of Redwings feeding on one of the grassed areas; an elusive Little Grebe whinnying from the nearby lake remained hidden from view, even after much searching and the lure of a prize (a packet of biscuits) to the finder!

We walked on to the edge of the paddock, an area that Hawfinch - our main target species here - was known to favour during the winter, feeding beneath the Hornbeams there. This time we didn't have to wait long before the first bird was seen, and during the next 45 minutes we enjoyed great views of up to a dozen birds perched in the lower branches of the trees or feeding on the ground. Although long grass at times hampered viewing when the birds were on the ground, 'part birds' were almost constantly on show and good views could be achieved with patience. It was interesting to see how vigorously they searched for food, tossing loose debris and leaves into the air as they fed. Several Crossbills and a pair of Marsh Tits were also seen before we returned to the minibus.

Moving on to the next site, it was very much a case of "third time lucky" as the stop quickly revealed a fine singing male Firecrest. The bird performed well, enabling everyone to see it - although it proved somewhat camera shy, disappearing back into the canopy as soon as they were produced.

From here, a short drive to a favoured spot for Brambling produced results almost immediately. Feeding under the beech trees, we could only find three birds today - but one, a male, was starting to look very smart indeed. A very obliging Nuthatch fed on the ground with them, which seemed a slightly unusual setting to see this bird.

After a coffee break, a discussion with several returning birders revealed they had drawn a blank with a Great Grey Shrike reported nearby. Undaunted however, we walked over to the area and scanned across it - but without success. Aware there was still an area hidden from view, however, we decided to take a further short walk and check the area more thoroughly. This was to prove a good move as the shrike was found, perched in typical fashion at the top of a broken tree trunk. By now, the group had become somewhat fragmented but a quick phone call to Jo soon had the troops reassembled and enjoying the bird!

Flushed with our success, we headed off to our lunch destination and venue for the afternoon: Lakenheath RSPB reserve, but stopping en route to add Little Owl to the list. We checked in at the visitors' centre, where the ever-helpful staff gave us a short talk on the brief history of this amazing reserve and the species that can be found there. Afterwards, we headed off to eat our picnic in the covered watchpoint overlooking the first wetland area. A Cetti's Warbler was heard and seen flying across in front of us, and several Marsh Harriers were also watched as we enjoyed our lunch. Afterwards, we walked out to the furthest watchpoint, where we stayed for an hour overlooking the extensive reedbed. Our target species here was Common Crane, and our luck continued to run as a group of four birds was found standing out in full view on a grass bank between the reedbed and the railway line. Other birds seen well here included Marsh Harriers, with up to eight birds, some calling and displaying. A Bittern was spotted dropping into the reedbed by Jo, but it refused to reappear for the rest of us; several Bearded Tits were also glimpsed and heard. A high flying Peregrine was then picked up, coming across in front of us, dropping in height, then appearing to scatter every local Woodpigeon as it presumably looked for a potential meal!

We returned to the minibus and headed back to the hotel via Lynford Water, a small conservation area adjacent to the Arboretum.

Day 4: Thu 1st March

We woke today to a bank of fog, which meant our planned itinerary was once again turned on its head. Having aborted our second trip for Goshawks yesterday due to the cloud cover and generally grey day, the start to the day today was no more encouraging, although the optimist in me would like to think I could see blue sky above the fog !

So, after breakfast we decided to pay a return visit to Santon Downham, where we spent an enjoyable two hours walking along the river there, concluding at St Helens, where we again found several Bramblings. The walk also produced good numbers of the expected woodland species in the adjacent poplar trees, including Great Spotted Woodpecker, Redwing, Marsh Tit and more Siskins. We finally managed to add Little Grebe to the trip list, with one found on the river, and a bonus bird came in the form of a Water Rail. Initially glimpsed running below the bank, it soon disappeared into a mass of overhanging vegetation and out of view. But we waited patiently and eventually the bird came back out, giving great views as it picked its way through the bankside vegetation.

Almost unbelievably, the fog was starting to lift and the sun began breaking through. By the time we had driven to the Goshawk site, the skies were clear and blue! We walked out to the viewing spot (noting several Red Admiral butterflies along the way), to be greeted by the surprise sighting of a Red-tailed Hawk (an escaped North American species) perched at the top of a distant tree on the horizon. The next two hours were arguably - and fittingly for a grand finale - the highlight of the trip, beginning with a Goshawk seen flying across the tree-line and away from us (at least we had seen one!). Then a high-flying displaying bird was picked up by Jo and we watched this powerful raptor performing above us for at least ten minutes before it disappeared from view. After a brief interlude, the excitement picked up again with a Woodlark song-flighting overhead, a show which was suddenly interrupted by the reappearance of not one but *two* Goshawks displaying together above us! As a bonus, one of the birds interacted briefly with a Sparrowhawk, which highlighted both the size and structural differences between the two species.

We returned to the minibus very pleased with our success and, after a well-earned tea break, climbed aboard. We drove back to the hotel, where we said our goodbyes after a very enjoyable three days birding.

Gary Elton

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

(Total number of species recorded: 89)

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Recorded on the first two days with good views had of roadside birds.

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Noted daily.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Noted at Lackford Lakes(2), Lakenheath(12) and Santon Downham(2).

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*

Recorded at all wetland sites

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Three were seen at Lackford Lakes, with singles noted at Lynford Water and Lakenheath.

Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*

Two distant birds at Cavenham Heath were followed by better views of three at Lakenheath RSPB

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Ten were recorded at Lackford Lakes

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Recorded at Lackford Lakes, Lakenheath RSPB and Lynford Water.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Common, seen daily.

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Six at Lackford Lakes were followed by c20 at Lakenheath Fen the following day.

Pintail *Anas acuta*

A splendid drake was picked out by Charles at Lakenheath Fen

Teal *Anas crecca*

Small numbers of birds were noted at all wetland sites visited.

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Ten were noted at Lackford Lakes, with a single bird seen in amongst the Tufted Duck at Lynford Water.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Recorded at Lackford Lakes (40), Lynford Water (50) and Lakenheath (20).

Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

Four drakes and four "redheads" were seen well at Lackford.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*

A splendid drake was a nice surprise find at Lackford.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Surprisingly scarce, with a bird heard at Lynford and one on the river at Santon Downham the only records.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Only recorded at Lakenheath Fen, with eight birds in total.

Bittern *Botaurus Stellaris*

One seen dropping into the reedbed by Jo at Lakenheath unfortunately eluded the rest of us.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Surprisingly, two at Lakenheath were the only ones seen.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

One was seen on the rear of the fen at Lakenheath.

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Noted at all wetland sites

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Noted daily in small numbers

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

One seen over the watchpoint at Lakenheath was a nice surprise.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

At least eight birds were seen at Lakenheath RSPB, including several displaying birds

Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

One of the star birds! Seen on two dates, with a single brief view on 28th, and prolonged views of at least two individuals displaying on the 1st.

Sparrowhawk *Accipter nisus*

One interacting with the above species was the only one seen.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Six birds were noted in total at various sites

[Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*

An escaped North American species. One perched in the top of a distant tree on the Thursday morning.]

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

Good views were had of one along the river edge at Santon Downham

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Noted daily in all suitable habitat.

Coot *Fulica atra*

Noted at all wetland sites.

Common Crane *Grus grus*

Four seen well, both on the ground and in flight at Lakenheath RSPB

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Two were seen at Lackford Lakes.

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Two at Lackford Lakes, were followed by c50 at Lakenheath RSPB.

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Two were seen distantly on the fen at Lakenheath RSPB.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Five were seen well at Lackford Lakes, with a single also noted at Lakenheath.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Common, noted daily.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

Seen in small numbers, mainly 1st year birds at Lackford Lakes and Lakenheath

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*

Twenty plus birds of varying ages were noted at Lackford Lakes.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

As above, seen in a variety of ages at Lackford Lakes

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Noted daily at various sites

Feral Pigeon (Rock Dove) *Columba livia*

Recorded daily

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Seen daily in small numbers, with nice roadside views of several birds

Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*

Noted daily and easily seen.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Easily seen around suburban areas.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

One seen near Lakenheath, unfortunately quickly disappeared from view

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Seen daily, particularly easy to see at Lynford Aboretum.

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Heard seemingly everywhere, with best views had at Cavenham Heath

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

One showed well at Santon Downham was nice addition to the list!

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Recorded daily in small numbers

Magpie *Pica pica*

Recorded daily in small numbers

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Common and easily seen.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Noted daily at various sites

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Seen daily in small numbers

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*

Noted daily, with pairs at Lynford Aboretum and Santon Downham showing particularly well.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

A common bird in the forest. Easily seen and constantly heard in suitable woodland habitat

Great Tit *Parus major*

Recorded daily

Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Noted daily

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Recorded at several sites

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Several were heard, but only one actually seen.

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

As above, with several heard, but only two seen well - particularly the bird at Cavenham.

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

At least two individuals were heard at Lakenheath RSPB reserve, with one seen well in flight.

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*

Several were heard and glimpsed flying across the top of the reeds at Lakenheath RSPB

Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus*

We finally caught up with this species at the third attempt, near Santon Downham on 29th - well worth the wait !

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Common and present seemingly everywhere in the forest, which was nice to see particularly after the last two hard winters.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Seen and heard daily.

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Recorded daily, with best views had of a ground feeding bird at Santon Downham.

Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Singing birds were heard at Lynford Aboretum, where two birds were also seen.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Common, noted daily,

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Seen and heard daily

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

An estimated 200 birds were feeding on the ground at Cavenham Heath.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

A hundred or so present with the above species at Cavenham Heath. Smaller numbers (20+) seen at Lynford Aboretum and Santon Downham.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Noted daily in small numbers

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

1-2 birds were heard and seen daily.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Common, seen daily

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Noted daily around suburban areas, including the hotel.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Recorded daily.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrellii*

1-2 birds were noted daily at various sites

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

An impressive flock of around 100 birds feeding alongside Redwings and Fieldfares at Cavenham Heath. Several others were also seen at Santon Downham.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common, seen daily.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

Noted in small numbers on both visits to Santon Downham.

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Seen daily, particularly easy to see around the hotel.

Siskin *Carduelis spinus*

Common throughout the area, seemingly seen and heard everywhere we went.

Lesser Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*

Noted daily in ones and twos, with a particularly striking male seen on 28th.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Seen daily at various sites.

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Thin on the ground with only ones and twos noted, though on a daily basis.

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*

Easily seen and heard throughout the forest.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

Another major highlight! A dozen birds were watched feeding beneath Hornbeams at Lynford Arboretum.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citronella*

Seen daily in small numbers

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Easily seen at Lackford Lakes and Lakenheath RSPB

MAMMALS

European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

European Hare *Lepus europaeus*

Muntjac *Muntiacus reevesi*

Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*

BUTTERFLIES

Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*