

Norfolk:

Autumn & Winter Breaks

Fri 7th-Sun 9th October 2011



*Photos (clockwise from top): A fine study of a **Grey Plover** in winter plumage © Arnoud van den Berg/Limosa • Adult winter **Mediterranean Gull** reveals a black-banded scarlet bill and snow-white wingtips © Mike Crewe/Limosa • Female **Marsh Harrier** gets ready to pounce © Arnoud van den Berg/Limosa*

**report compiled by tour leader:
Gary Elton**

Trip Diary

Tour Leader: Gary Elton

with Mike & Barbara Downes, Vivien Hall, and Margaret Hyland

The group arrived and assembled at our north Norfolk hotel on the Friday evening, where after introductions and an enjoyable evening meal we retired to bed full of the expectations for the days ahead.

We woke the following day to a breezy (some would say blustery) day, and all met up for some pre-breakfast birding from the back of the hotel, which over looks the nearby beach and sea. The tide was receding and large numbers gulls and commoner waders were noted, the later being mainly Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed Godwit and Curlew, with a few Sanderling, Grey Plover and Knot also seen. The sea by comparison appeared very quiet, with a few distant Gannets, and the only real birds of note being four Eider that flew along the shoreline.

A calling over-flying Redwing as we departed the hotel after breakfast was a reminder that winter was just around the corner. We started our journey east along the coast but, as usual, did not get far before we stopped again, on seeing a small covey of partridges in a roadside field; a closer look revealed both Red-legged and three Grey.

We continued on to our first scheduled destination, Stiffkey Fen, a small privately-owned nature reserve positioned adjacent to the sea wall that overlooks Blakeney Harbour. A scan round from the roadside out towards Blakeney Point revealed several dozen Grey Seals loafing on the beach there, and a scattering flock of corvids signalled the presence of a Common Buzzard. We walked down, along the side of the fen and onto the sea wall, to gain a good view of both the fen and the mouth of Blakeney Harbour. Large numbers of Brent Geese, Great Black-backed Gulls and Oystercatcher, plus thirty or so Shelduck, were noted in the harbour. On the fen itself, several hundred Teal were present, and searching through these soon revealed small numbers of Pintail, Wigeon and the first Black-tailed Godwits of the day, plus a solitary feeding Snipe. A single Goldcrest, presumably a migrant, was heard and seen in a small patch of nearby willow scrub, and a small passage of Skylarks overhead during our visit gave hinted of at least some autumn migration.

Returning to the minibus, we made our way further along the coast to Cley NWT reserve, where after a quick visit to the visitor centre we made the short drive to the East Bank car park. Cups of coffee here were followed by a walk out along the East Bank to view the sea, which produced good views of Egyptian Goose, Meadow Pipit and two Spotted Redshanks along the way. The sea was far more productive than earlier in the day, with a steady procession of Gannets passing offshore, a single Arctic Skua, and several Red throated Divers noted on the water. At this point, the group continued to walk west to the beach car park for lunch, encountering a flock of Golden Plover along the way, whilst Gary walked back to collect the bus, driving it round to meet them there. Lunchtime was spent sat in the shelter looking out to sea, which enabled a confiding Guillemot and a distant Manx Shearwater to make their way onto the trip list.

After lunch, we made one final visit to the visitor centre before again moving on, this time returning west along the coast and stopping at Wells Harbour. With the tide rising, the harbour was relatively quiet though we did manage nice views of Turnstone, Curlew and a distant Ringed Plover. Our last stop of the day was at Holkham freshmarsh, which is part of Holkham estate and a National Nature Reserve managed by Natural England. We walked out along the track between the pines and fresh marsh. Several thousand Pink-footed Geese were noted, along with the expected Wigeon, Teal and Pintail; two Spoonbill were more of a surprise, found feeding on the pool in front of the elevated Washington Hide. We walked onto the second hide finding the pathside woodland areas surprisingly quiet, and with the weather by this time deteriorating we returned to the minibus in the rain.

With our fingers firmly crossed, we drove back along the coast road towards the hotel hoping for views of Barn Owl - even though conditions were far from perfect. But our prayers were answered, as a bird flew across in front of the minibus allowing us to pull in and watch it disappear off across an adjacent field.

We woke next day to a disappointingly wet and cloudy morning, so after breakfast we made our way through Hunstanton, stopping to view the receding tideline at the southern end of the town. Large numbers of gulls and waders were evident, and scanning through them revealed half a dozen Sandwich Terns sat amongst them. We drove further along the beach and a second stop produced an adult winter-plumaged Mediterranean Gull in amongst its commoner cousins.

The rain had now stopped and the clouds were clearing as we made our way across country towards Choseley drying barns, where we stopped again, checking the hedgerows for finches and buntings, and adding several Yellowhammers to our list. Next stop was at nearby Brancaster Staithe, where the exposed tidal mud rewarded us with some nice views of close commoner waders, plus a group of twenty or so Ringed Plovers.

We moved back along to the coast to Holkham, this time parking on the south side of the coast road, close to the entrance to the grounds of the Hall and Holkham Park. Here we spent the next hour and a half, walking through the mature woodlands to the lake, and back again. Woodland birds encountered included Nuthatch, Treecreeper and Marsh Tit, along with several Redwings and two vocal Bramblings - though neither of the latter would reveal themselves. On the lake, several Great Crested Grebes were seen, though the only new addition there was a solitary female Tufted Duck.

With tummies rumbling it was time to move on to our lunch venue, Titchwell RSPB reserve, where we had lunch by the minibus before making use of the facilities and moving on past the visitor centre and onto the reserve. We took the boardwalk, pausing briefly at the Fen hide, before moving onto view the pool west of the main path, then into the Island hide that over looks the freshmarsh. The water level had been dropped to allow work on the sea defences to be finished and this, coupled with a strong westerly breeze, resulted in the remaining water plus the majority of birds being either out in the centre of the marsh or on the far islands. Scanning with a telescope revealed a mixed flock of Lapwing and Ruff, plus several Black-tailed Godwits and Dunlin. Wildfowl were well represented again, with the expected Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler and Pintail present. A feeding Common Snipe was found, which proved challenging for everyone to see, as did a male Sparrowhawk perched on the top of a distant bush.

We continued along the path to the beach, gaining good views again of species such as Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Little Grebe along the way. The rising tide meant large numbers of shorebirds were concentrated on the beach, including large numbers of Knot, a species we had seen few of up until then, plus several Gannets and distant Red-throated Divers on the sea.

Our final destination was the newly constructed 'state of the art' Parinder hide, which is a bit like marmite - you seem to either love it or hate it! The hide looks out over both the saltmarsh and freshmarsh, with views over the latter somewhat closer to the birds than the Island Hide earlier. A third-winter Lesser Black-backed Gull found loafing there was the first of the trip.

With time ticking by we returned to the minibus and drove to nearby Thornham Harbour, where we spent 15 minutes looking across the marshes at the birds assembled there. We then made the short drive back to the hotel, where we said our goodbyes before making our return journeys home.

Gary Elton

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

(Total number of species recorded by the group 98)

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Small coveys of birds were noted both days.

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*

Three birds were seen in roadside field, along with several of the above species on 8th.

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Recorded daily.

Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*

Several thousand were noted during the weekend, mainly on the first day at Holkham, with smaller numbers also noted elsewhere.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*

A single bird was noted as we walked along the East Bank at Cley.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Seen at the East Bank, Cley and Holkham freshmarsh.

Dark-bellied Brent Goose *Branta bernicula*

Noted throughout the trip at a variety of sites.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Several were present at Cley and Titchwell.

Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*

Our first were at Cley (20), with similar numbers seen at Titchwell and in fields by Choseley barns.

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Seen at Blakeney, Holkham and Titchwell.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Three were seen on the North Scrape at Cley NWT reserve.

Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Noted at all wetland sites visited in large numbers.

Pintail *Anas acuta*

Seen in small numbers at Stiffkey Fen, Cley and Titchwell.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Common, seen at all wetland sites

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Noted daily in small numbers.

Teal *Anas crecca*

Easily seen at all wetland sites visited, again in large numbers.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

A single female bird was on the lake at Holkham Park.

Eider *Somateria mollissima*

Four were noted flying along the shoreline at Hunstanton on our first day.

Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra*

Singles were seen well on the sea at Cley and Titchwell, with several other more distant birds seen in flight.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*

A 'redhead' was noted leading a small flock of Wigeon along the shoreline at Cley.

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*

Good views of several on the sea at Cley and Titchwell.

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*

A solitary distant bird was seen from the beach car park at Cley.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Noted at Cley, Holkham and Titchwell.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

At least five were noted on the sea at Hunstanton, with two more seen on Holkham Lake .

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

Two feeding in front of the hide at Holkham were a nice surprise.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Several were noted on both days.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Noted at various sites during both days.

Gannet *Morus bassanus*

Good views were had of birds relatively close inshore on the first day, with more distant birds noted on day two.

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Recorded daily in small numbers

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Several were seen on 8th.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Birds were noted at Cley, Holkham and Titchwell.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

A perched male bird showed distantly but well for us at Titchwell.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

One was seen at Stiffkey Fen on 8th.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Common, recorded daily.

Coot *Fulica atra*

Surprisingly scarce, with only half a dozen or so seen.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Common, seen daily in large numbers.

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Recorded both days in small numbers.

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

A flock of c50 birds were noted at Cley.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Recorded in small numbers at all coastal sites.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

A single bird was seen at Wells Harbour, with c20 seen at Brancaster Staithe.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Two were seen at Stiffkey Fen and a single was noted at Titchwell.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Small numbers were noted at Stiffkey Fen, Cley, Holkham and Titchwell.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

Easily seen at all suitable coastal habitat.

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Seen at all coastal sites visited.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

Two were seen well adjacent to the East Bank at Cley.

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Common, recorded in all suitable habitat

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Seen well in Wells harbour and at Brancaster Staithe.

Knot *Calidris canutus*

Noted on the beach on our first day at Hunstanton, with larger numbers and better views had at Titchwell on 9th.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Seen at various sites, including Hunstanton and Titchwell.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

As above, noted in small numbers.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Three birds were present on the fields adjacent to the East Bank at Cley, with a further 40 + present at Titchwell on the freshmarsh.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Common, seen in numerous locations.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

Common, easily seen.

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyophaga melanocephalus*

A winter adult bird was picked out amongst the large number of gulls on the exposed sand at Heacham.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*

Easily seen at coastal sites.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Easily seen at all coastal sites.

Lesser Black backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

A single third-year bird was present on the freshmarsh at Titchwell.

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*

At least six birds were seen on the beach between the groynes at Hunstanton.

Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*

One flew close to shore at the end of the East Bank at Cley

Guillemot *Uria aalge*

One showed well to us from the beach car park at Cley.

Feral Pigeon (Rock Dove) *Columba livia*

Seen daily

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Several were seen in amongst Woodpigeon on roadside fields on our first day, with several others also noted thereafter.

Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*

Common, seen daily

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common, seen daily

Barn Owl *Tyto alba*

One bird in the rain was a lucky find as we drove back to the hotel at the end of our first day.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

One flew across the road in front of us as we drove through Stiffkey; a second was heard but not seen at Holkham Park

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

One was heard several times at Holkham Park.

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Noted daily in ones and twos at various sites

Magpie *Pica pica*

Seen daily in small numbers

Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Common. Seen daily, primarily in roadside flocks

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Common. Seen daily in roadside flocks

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Small numbers were noted throughout the trip at various sites

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*

A calling bird showed well by the lake at Holkham Park.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

One was seen well, with several others heard, at Holkham Park.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Seen daily in small numbers during the trip.

Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

As above, several were seen.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Several roaming flocks were noted over the two days.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Easily seen and heard, with small migrating flocks noted passing overhead on both days.

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*.

Singing birds were noted at Cley and Holkham

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

A single bird seen well at Stiffkey Fen, with several others seen and heard at Holkham Park.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Recorded daily at various sites

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*.

One showed well at Holkham Park, with a second present and several others heard during our visit.

Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*

Several were heard at Holkham, with at least three seen well in Holkham Park.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Common, recorded daily

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Common, recorded daily

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

A single bird over the hotel was the first seen, with several more noted by the gates at Holkham Park.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Two were seen as we returned to the minibus at Holkham freshmarsh.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

At least six were noted at Holkham Park, with several others noted during our travels.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Seen daily.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Easily seen around the caravan park and chalets at Hunstanton and Heacham.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Recorded daily.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrellii*

Recorded daily at various sites, with at least ten seen at Titchwell.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Seen daily, with birds seen well at Cley and Titchwell.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common, recorded daily.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

Several were heard, but unfortunately could not be seen, at Holkham Park.

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Two showed well at Stiffkey Fen.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Several flocks were noted on both days.

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Small flocks of 6+ birds were noted along the East Bank at Cley, and at Titchwell.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

Several, including one very bright bird, were seen along the hedgerow at Choseley Barns.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Brief views were had of several calling birds at Stiffkey Fen.

MAMMALS

Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*

Muntjac *Muntiacus muntjak*

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*

BUTTERFLIES

Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*