

Norfolk Coast: Wild Geese & Waders

Fri 3rd - Mon 6th October 2014



We had good views of this first record of Steppe Grey Shrike for Norfolk. Found at Burnham Norton, this Asian form of the 'grey shrike' complex is closely related to another Asian form lahtora and is probably best treated as a species in its own right. Whatever it is called, we enjoyed it! © Dr Kevin Elsby, www.wildlifeontheweb.co.uk

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

Trip Diary

Tour Leader: Gary Elton

with Dave Johnson, Jo Parrilla, Ann Piper, Brian & Jean Smith and Sasha Foreman

Day 1 – Fri 3 October

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

Day 2 – Sat 4 October

The following morning saw the group assemble at the rear of the hotel, to spend a short time before breakfast familiarising ourselves with the selection of common shore birds assembled on the beach below. The hotel's position in relation to the mouth of the Wash offers a good opportunity to experience visible migration of early day-flying migrants or 'viz mig' as it's known and, although conditions weren't ideal, small numbers of finches and pipits were noted regularly flying over, slightly more unusual though was a group of eight Grey Herons watched flying low in off the sea.

After breakfast we made the short drive to nearby Holme Nature reserve, where we parked by the entrance and made our way along the footpath and onto the beach. Three Greenshanks were found roosting in one of the tidal creeks, and whilst watching these, a pair of Stonechats appeared on top of the nearby bushes. The walk along the beach gave us further opportunities to study the shorebirds feeding there. Knot, Curlew, Oystercatcher and Sanderling were easily seen, with smaller numbers of Turnstone, Ringed and Grey Plover discovered amongst them. Juvenile Gannets plunge-dived just offshore and Brent Geese flew noisily along the tideline.

We walked as far as the Bird Observatory, where the warden, Sophie, had agreed to wait for our arrival before opening the moth trap. Numbers were unfortunately low but included species such as Flounced Rustic, Feathered Ranunculus and Bright-line Brown-eye (or was it Brown-line Bright-eye?!). We made our way through the small reserve, pausing to view the broad-water from the car park hide, with our first Spotted Redshank and a Snipe seen. The walk back along the gravel drive allowed us to view the grazing marsh. Here several Pinkfeet fed amongst the more numerous Greylags and scanning through the assembled wildfowl revealed large numbers of Wigeon and Teal plus a handful of Black-tailed Godwits.

Boarding the minibus we made the short drive to nearby Thornham Harbour, where lunch followed, though as the forecast rain had now started to fall it had to be taken in the comfort of the 'bus. Titchwell RSPB reserve was our main destination for the afternoon with the hides enabling us to continue birding and stay dry. A showy Water Rail and views of several Bearded Tits were had from the Island hide, and scanning the waders eventually produced two Little Stints with the Dunlin. These views were distant but both birds were seen better from the Parrinder hide, and other waders seen included Avocet, Ringed Plover, Ruff and Golden Plover. A walk to view the sea proved surprisingly unproductive, with Gannets again noted offshore and another female Stonechat found in the path side bushes.

With rain now subsiding and the sun starting appear we made a return visit to Thornham Harbour. Brent Geese and Shelduck could be seen out on the marsh and the harbour channel revealed five more Greenshank, a Kingfisher flashed past, but unfortunately Dave was the only one quick enough to see it. A scan through the loafing gulls eventually revealed the expected Mediterranean Gull, a sleeping adult, plus five Sandwich Terns.

Day 3 – Sun 5 October

Our day started again at the rear of the hotel and with nothing new on show we decided to take a walk along the edge of the dunes. 'Viz mig' was again in evidence with Starlings being the most obvious species as flocks of several hundred birds passed over us.

With a nice day forecast, the plan today was to make the most of this and have a slightly later finish to the day. A short drive to Brancaster gave us views out over the small harbour, where the approachable Turnstones and Ringed Plover were enjoyed at close range by the group. Moving along the coast we stopped next at Burnham Overy Staithe where we walked out along the raised sea wall. A lovely sunny morning greeted us, in stark contrast to the day before, and we moseyed along enjoying views out over the harbour mouth and grazing marshes. Several Marsh Harriers were noted, joined briefly by a Red Kite, which unfortunately decided to stay largely hidden from view on the ground for the remainder of our visit.

The sun had also brought out the insects, and butterflies seen included Wall Brown, Red Admiral and a Small Copper, plus several Migrant Hawker dragonflies. The small reed-fringed pool on the west of the marsh eventually gave us views of a Black-necked Grebe, a bird that had been in residence there for the last few weeks with several nearby Little Grebes a useful comparison. Three Chinese Water Deer also appeared here watched working their way nervously around the edge of the pool. Other species noted during the walk included another Stonechat, Egyptian Geese and Bearded Tit, though the latter were heard far more than they were seen.

Returning to the minibus we continued our journey east along the coast, arriving for lunch at the NOA watchpoint at Walsey Hills for lunch. Distant birds could be seen on the marshes at Cley from here, and closer birds included Coal and Great Tits visiting the feeders visible below us. A walk from here along the east bank of Cley followed, where again Bearded Tits were heard and glimpsed in the adjacent reed bed. At the end of the path we scanned the sea noting our first Red-throated Divers of the trip and a close in Grey Seal. A loo-stop at the visitor centre at the Cley reserve itself, enabled us to scan the nearby pools, where Pintail, Ruff and Golden Plover among others were seen.

We started our return journey along the coast making two more stops, the first at Stiffkey Fen, where the hoped for Spoonbills were unfortunately not in residence, possibly down to the lower than normal water levels there and the second at Burnham Norton to see a Steppe Grey Shrike. The shrike had been found early that morning, a 1st for Norfolk, and its attendance and impending mayhem had been relayed to Gary in texts during the day. When we arrived we were pleasantly surprised with both the ease of parking and the relative lack of people at the site, and the bird importantly was showing nicely on brambles several hundred yards in front of the main path. We enjoyed good looks at the bird in the evening sun, after which we returned to the minibus and made our way back along the coast to the hotel.

Day Four – Mon 6 Oct

With a poor weather forecast and it being the last day, we went straight in for breakfast hoping to get an earlier start to the day. Rain had been forecast by mid morning, and unfortunately they weren't wrong. Our first destination of the day was Wells Wood; as we drove along the harbour road towards the site, a Wheatear was seen in flight by the front-seat passengers.

The woods themselves were disappointedly quiet with a stiff breeze encouraging the birds to stay in cover and hence out of view. Several calling Brambling flew over and a Great Spotted Woodpecker was heard, then unfortunately, right on cue, the rain started. We returned to the minibus driving a short distance along the coast road to stop at a stubble field and view a large flock of Pinkfeet there. As we pulled up the geese seemed nervous with some starting to take off; the reason soon became clear as a Red Kite appeared, flying over the top of them and eventually putting them all up.

We headed back along the coast to Titchwell, which was both convenient for the hotel and our mid-afternoon departure, but more importantly somewhere we could at least keep warm and dry. We had lunch and coffee by the 'bus before spending the next couple of hours dividing our time between the hides and, in between showers, the sea. Birds seen were largely as before, with the Water Rail again showing well for us in front of the Island hide and large numbers of feeding juvenile Gannets out over the sea, though four Red-breasted Mergansers just off shore were new birds for the trip.

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 104)

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Roadside coveys were noted on all days.

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*

A roadside covey of nine near Hunstanton on 5th.

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Recorded daily.

Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*

Seen throughout, with flock of several thousand seen on the fields near Wells.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*

Several noted at Holme and Burnham Overy Staithe.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Easily seen at Titchwell, Burnham Overy Staithe and Cley.

Dark-bellied Brent Goose *Branta bernicula bernicula*

Noted daily, seen well at Titchwell and Hunstanton.

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Noted daily, with birds seen at Titchwell, Cley and at the Mill at Burnham Norton.

Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*

Only two seen, at Burnham Overy on 5th.

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Noted daily in small numbers at various sites.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Seen at Titchwell, Cley and Siffkey Fen.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Noted daily primarily at Titchwell, Cley and Stiffkey Fen

Pintail *Anas acuta*

Several were seen at Titchwell and Cley.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Common, seen at all wetland sites visited.

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Noted daily in small numbers.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

Easily seen at all wetland sites visited, particularly numerous at Titchwell and Cley.

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Up to six at Titchwell and a single at Burnham Overy.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Two at Titchwell on 4th.

Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra*

A distant flock of c. 800 birds could be seen off shore at Holme.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*

Four redheads were seen just offshore on our second visit to Titchwell.

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*

Three from the end of the east bank at Cley, with a further two on our second visit to Titchwell.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Seen at Holme (four), Titchwell (six) Burnham Overy (three) and Wells (four).

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Singles were seen on the sea at Hunstanton and Holme.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

A somewhat elusive bird at Burnham Overy eventually allowed good views to be had by all.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

An unusual sight was a group of eight flying along the shoreline on our first mornings seawatch, with singles seen at most other wetland sites visited.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Easily seen and noted at all wetland sites visited.

Gannet *Morus bassanus*

Seen daily out over the sea, the majority of the birds being juveniles.

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Noted daily.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Noted daily, generally single hunting birds.

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

A distant bird at Burnham Overy, was followed by more confiding birds at Burnham Overy, Wells Woods and Holkham.

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Regularly seen throughout the trip, at Holme, Titchwell, Burnham Overy and Cley.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

A roadside bird seen from the minibus at Burham Norton was the only one seen.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Several were noted on the 5th, with a perched roadside bird at Choseley and several more at Burnham Overy.

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

One at Titchwell showed amazingly well for us from the Island hide on both visits, with another heard calling at Burnham Overy.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Noted daily

Coot *Fulica atra*

Noted daily

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Common, seen daily in large numbers.

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Seen well at Titchwell, up to 12, plus a single at Stiffkey Fen.

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Recorded daily in small numbers.

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Surprisingly scarce with only two noted at Titchwell and c. 50 at Cley.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

1-2 were noted at various sites.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Seen daily at various coastal sites.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Noted at Titchwell, Thornham Harbour and Stiffkey Fen.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Easily seen at Titchwell, with others noted at Stiffkey Fen, Cley and Brancaster and Thornham Harbours .

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

Seen along Hunstanton and Titchwell beaches.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

A single calling bird was seen at Burnham Overy.

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Seen and heard at all suitable sites visited.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

Single birds were noted at Holme and Titchwell.

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Common, recorded daily.

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Our first, three at Holme, were followed by five in Thornham Harbour and 15 at Stiffkey Fen.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Seen at Holme, Titchwell and Brancaster Harbour.

Knot *Calidris canutus*

Large numbers (c. 1000+) were seen on the beach at Hunstanton and Holme.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Seen daily along the coast.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

Two showed well at Titchwell, on both our visits there.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

Seen in small numbers, primarily at Titchwell.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Easily seen on the freshmarsh at Titchwell; smaller numbers also noted at Cley and Stiffkey Fen.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Common, noted daily.

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*

A roosting adult bird was seen at Thornham Harbour.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

Common, and again seen daily.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*

Noted daily at all coastal sites visited.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

As above noted daily.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Single adult birds were noted at Titchwell and from the East Bank on Arnold's Marsh.

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

One was seen at Holme, with five more noted in Thornham Harbour.

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

Seen daily, primarily around the hotel building and during our travels.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Only one seen, from the minibus on 5th.

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Common, seen daily

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Noted in and around the villages as we travelled around over the three days.

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

One was seen in flight by Dave at Thornham Harbour, though unfortunately too quick to be seen by the rest of the group.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

A distant bird could be heard calling during our visit to Wells Woods.

Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius [lahtora/excubitor] pallidirostris*

Surprise of the trip, this Asian form of the 'Great Grey Shrike complex' – and a likely 'split'. A first for Norfolk, it was found early in the morning of the 5th at Burnham Norton and showed for the remainder of the day enabling us to 'twitch it' as we travelled back along the coast to the hotel.

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Noted at various sites and seen regularly over flying the road.

Magpie *Pica pica*

Seen daily in small numbers

Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Seen daily in both fields and around village roof tops

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Several were seen well at Cley.

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Small numbers were noted throughout the trip at various sites.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

Seen in the Pines at Holme and on the feeders at Walsey Hills, with others heard at Wells Woods.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Noted daily, in small numbers

Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

As above noted daily, with birds encountered in many of the coastal stretches we visited.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Small noisy flocks were encountered on our pre breakfast watches and at Wells Woods.

Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis*

Seen and heard daily,

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*.

Singing birds were noted at Holme, Titchwell and Burnham Norton.

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Singles were seen at Titchwell and Burnham Overy.

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*

A variety of views gained by all the group at Titchwell, Burnham Overy and East Bank Cley.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Heard daily at suitable sites, but unfortunately none were seen.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Recorded daily at various sites

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Seen daily in small flocks.

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Noted daily; easily seen around the hotel grounds.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Presumed mainly migrant birds were encountered at Holme, Hunstanton and Wells woods.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Roadside birds were seen on the 4th and 5th (four).

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Recorded daily with singing birds seen near the hotel.

Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

A pair at Holme were followed by single females at Titchwell and Burnham Overy.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Brief views of a bird in flight over the harbour road at Wells.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Easily seen at Burnham Overy.

Duncock *Prunella modularis*

Noted daily.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrellii*

Recorded daily, with largest numbers at Titchwell.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Noted daily, the majority calling over flying birds.

Rock Pipit *Anthus petrosus*

Over flying calling birds were seen at Thornham Harbour and Burnham Overy.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common, recorded daily.

Brambling *Fringilla montfringilla*

Two calling birds over flew us during our visit to Wells woods.

Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

Noted in small numbers daily

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Several were noted during the tour, the most visible on the feeders at Titchwell.

Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

A small flock of c. 30 birds were seen on wires near Choseley on 5th, with several also noted at Cley later in the day.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

A solitary bird on wires near Ringstead, was unfortunately only seen well by those in the front of the minibus before flying off over the fields.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Several were noted at Holme, Titchwell and Burnham Overy.

Mammals

Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*

Brown Hare *Lepus europeaus*

Chinese Water Deer *Hydropotes inermis*

Butterflies

Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*

Speckled Wood *Pararge aegeria*

Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas*

Small White *Pieris rapae*

Wall Brown *Lasiommata megera*

Dragonflies

Common Darter *Sympetrum striolatum*

Migrant Hawker *Aeshna mixta*