



# ORIOLE BIRDING



## TOUR REPORT NORFOLK WINTER 8<sup>TH</sup> — 13<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2016

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TUESDAY 9TH FEBRUARY - *Moderate South-west winds, bright and cold 4C*

The first day of the second of our 2016 Norfolk winter tours saw a fine day of weather and a great start to the trip with well over 80 species recorded. With so many good birds around in Norfolk at the moment, it was almost hard to know where to start, but we opted for Blakeney Freshmarsh as several members of the group were keen to try and catch up with Lapland Bunting. The walk out along the bank added our first flocks of Brent Geese, Little Egret, Common Stonechat, Rock Pipit and almost before we had left the car park, two ringtail Hen Harriers were seen distantly over the dunes of Blakeney Point. A Common Greenshank flew up from the channel just past the first sluice, and we had excellent views of it in one of the creeks with a Common Redshank for comparison. On the freshmarsh side, two Marsh Harriers were seen including a fine adult male - a good start to the morning! Last time we had been here, the buntings were very difficult, but it couldn't have been more different today. We heard a Lapland Bunting call as soon as we reached the favoured area, and soon had it in the scope, perched on the fence! Over the next hour, we had two distinctly different birds on and off, feeding in the open on the muddy ground with Skylarks and a small party of seven Twite. It was great to get these birds all in the same scope view. The performance was capped off by remarkable views of a brightly marked male Lapland, feeding right by the fence and only a few feet away from us - superb!



Lapland Bunting, Blakeney 9<sup>th</sup> February

After warming up with a coffee at nearby Morston [where another wintering Common Greenshank showed well in the harbour], we continued on to Wells for a quick check of the harbour for the wintering Shag - we couldn't see it, though the state of tide was unfavourable. We added several Little Grebes and a lot of Brent Geese, then moved on down to the beach car park. Our plan here was



to check for roosting Tawny Owl, but again we drew a blank despite grilling its two favoured trees - excellent views of a male Goldcrest were some compensation. Next up was the adjacent park at Holkham where we hoped to catch up with a couple of goodies among the wintering flock of *aythya* ducks. After a pleasant walk down through the woods, we reached the lake and right away could see the two immature drake Greater Scaup, really fine birds looking especially resplendent with their bottle green heads shining in the winter sun. Right behind them, asleep on the shore, was our main target - a female Ferruginous Duck. The bird remained asleep through the majority of our stay, waking up and swimming around only briefly until we were just about to leave, at which point she decided to give us some better views! Several Egyptian Geese, Common Pochard, Northern Shoveler and Gadwall were also seen, while a fine adult Mediterranean Gull flew over on its way down to the lake. European Nuthatch and Common Treecreeper were both seen on the walk back through the woods - not bad considering we hadn't had lunch yet!



Ferruginous Duck, Holkham 9<sup>th</sup> February

Lady Anne's Drive provided a fitting spot for lunch, surrounded by big flocks of Eurasian Wigeon and a nice Common Snipe among the marshy pools by the road. The walk west through the pines though was rather quiet, with two female Common Goldeneye with the Little Grebes on Salt's Hole the highlight. From the hide, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, two Red Kites and a few Northern Pintails were seen, but we couldn't see a single Pink-footed Goose from here! Three nice Ruff were with some Dunlin by the drive as we returned to the vehicle, and we saw several more Goldcrests and Coal Tits too, before heading along the A149 to try and get an alternative view of the marshes. This proved more successful, with three different Barn Owls seen including one hunting right beside us, and a party of 65 Eurasian White-fronted Geese grazing in perfect afternoon sunlight. Marsh Harriers quartered at every turn and then the wintering Great White Egret popped up out of a channel and flew a short distance across in front of us - frustratingly though it went partially out of

view behind a stand of trees and we just couldn't see it from our current position. This was eventually rectified as we found a spot further along the road where we could get a scope on it in full view - great stuff!

The afternoon was racing away with us as it often does at this time of year, but with the sun still shining we knew we had about an hour still to play with. So it was on to Brancaster Staithe Harbour and another long staying over-winterer - the superb Red-necked Grebe, which did the business for us again today. Often it was in the company of an absolutely dazzling drake Common Goldeneye, and of course we enjoyed close ups of many waders too - Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Grey and Common Ringed Plovers and Ruddy Turnstone. The pager then alerted us that the Rough-legged Buzzards were currently showing at Choseley and being no more than five minutes away, we decided to end the day there. We were greeted with a very pale breasted buzzard with dark belly perched on the favoured hedge line - surely the bird? Nope, just a Common Buzzard, but a bit of a tricky one - its dark head gave the game away, and the belly was brown rather than tar-black like a Rough-leg. It flew to reveal we had made the right call - no white in the tail. A second buzzard was perched further down - also Common. We had to make do with some fantastic views of Grey Partridges, and the amazing sight of a field full of fifty Brown Hares! We would in any case have another chance to try again another day.

**WEDNESDAY 10TH FEBRUARY** - *Rain at first clearing to sunny spells and light winds, 5C*

We headed East today, driving through rain for the first hour until we reached our first destination, a chilly and grey Strumpshaw Fen. The wildlife hadn't really read the script here this morning, and in truth it was really quiet, but we did add a couple of new species - a nice flock of Eurasian Siskins in the woodland for starters. From Fen Hide, five Common Snipe could be picked out, but we were hoping for better - of course one or two Marsh Harriers could be seen over the reeds. The main pool from reception hide was full of Gadwall, Common Teal and Northern Shoveler, but alas a Bittern wouldn't make a flight for us today. Moving on, we headed back onto the A47 and across Halvergate Marshes to Great Yarmouth, picking up a Peregrine flying level with us as we went along. It was a very high tide on Breydon Water and viewing from the footpath near the hide at the east end afforded good views of vast numbers of roosting birds. Colossal flocks of Eurasian Wigeon were present here, and among them some superb Northern Pintails looking resplendent in the excellent light. Waders thronged the islands - Bar and Black-tailed Godwits, Dunlin, Red Knot, Grey Plover, European Golden Plover, Pied Avocets and two nice Spotted Redshanks. Down at the seafront, we didn't have any trouble finding some super Mediterranean Gulls, with around forty birds on the beach between the piers and grappling for crumbs right in front of us. We lunched here, but couldn't find the wintering Glaucous Gull at any of its usual haunts - perhaps it has moved on.

Travelling northwards, we cut inland to Potter Heigham and on to nearby Ludham Airfield, where we easily located the herd of wild swans. There were not many birds present today, and they were mainly Whooper Swans, but there were a few Bewick's Swans mixed in amongst them and we had some really nice views of them through the scopes. A rather out of place looking Chinese Water Deer came cantering across the cereal field in front of them. Back onto the coast road at Winterton, the sun was now shining and we enjoyed a vigorous walk up the north beach to look for the wintering flock of Snow Buntings - fifteen of which were present and showing down to a few metres on the stony tideline. Northern Gannets were passing in numbers offshore - a clear increase from recent weeks and a sign they are moving back into the North Sea to be closer to their colonies further north. Two Sanderling were also scuttling along the shore - another addition to the trip list.

Taking the coast road towards Horsey, our plan was to spend a bit of time birding the coastal fields and very soon we were enjoying a real feast of birds in beautiful afternoon sunlight. Two Common Cranes floated in from the dunes and dropped behind a maize crop, and suddenly the sky was full of geese as a big flock of Pink-feet came whiffing down onto the fields in front of us. We scoured them unsuccessfully for Bean Geese, but instead had to make do with a lovely flock of European Golden Plovers and hunting Common Buzzard and Common Kestrel. Time was ticking away, and after

stopping to watch a roadside Barn Owl on a post, we needed to head on to Stubb's Mill at Hickling for the evening roost. The light was just fantastic and straight away two more Barn Owls could be seen hunting, and Marsh Harriers were making their way into the roost area. Numbers were way down on a couple of weeks back, and perhaps the total number of birds seen was around thirty. The undoubted highlight was a fantastic Short-eared Owl, hunting right in front of the viewpoint and illuminated perfectly by a late evening glow - always such an awesome bird to see. Passerines included Common Linnet, Common Stonechat, Reed Bunting and Fieldfare, and all the time we could hear, but not see, Common Cranes bugling in the distance. We clung on as late as possible, and we rewarded with two good birds in quick succession - the first a Merlin dashing by low over the marsh, the second a fine male Hen Harrier distantly by the old windpump. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk cruising past was our final raptor of the day, and walking back in the half light a lovely silhouetted Eurasian Woodcock flew over the track.



Short-eared Owl, Hickling 10<sup>th</sup> February



THURSDAY 11TH FEBRUARY - *Fine sunny day in light winds, 5C*

We had planned to save the best day of weather for our visit to the Norfolk Brecks this week, as the forest is normally happier to give up some of its specialities in fine conditions, particularly at this time of year we weren't disappointed, and caught up with most of what we were hoping for despite having to work pretty hard for all of it! Lynford was our first stop, as it felt as though the heavy frost this morning might just change the habits of the Hawfinches, which have been pretty much impossible to see away from late afternoon. They have not been using the feeding station this year due to the mild weather and plentiful natural food supply, but perhaps today might spark a change. The woodlands around the Arboretum were full of common species such as European Nuthatch, Common Treecreeper, Eurasian Siskin, Coal Tit and Marsh Tit, while a stunning male Brambling was foraging beneath the feeders with the Chaffinches. A quick sortie to the paddocks and back failed to produce any Hawfinches though, but we did have two fly-bys from a single calling Common Crossbill - not easy to catch up with just now! We decided to move on, and come back later.

Heading deeper into the forest, we spent a couple of hours exploring one of our favourite tracks and the most noteworthy thing right from the off was the sudden reappearance of Woodlarks. Other than one brief bird back in January, this was the first time we had witnessed song-flighting birds this year and it was great to have them back! The wonderful cadence of fluted notes was a constant backdrop through the morning, and we saw two different birds pretty well overhead. Skylarks were up singing too, making for a good comparison. Our other target bird was Northern Goshawk, and with a good crisp clear morning we felt we had a good chance of a sighting. An hour in though and no sign of any raptors at all, not even a Common Buzzard - perhaps it was still too cold. A party of Fieldfare kept us briefly entertained, and then a big female Goshawk came up very distantly over the treetops. She powered off into the sky, joining a male, and they followed one another the best part of a mile across the forest until we lost them in the distance - no displaying, so presumably off on a hunting trip somewhere. Heading back along the track, a superb Woodlark perched in a pine ahead of us and then a second one popped up in the grass nearby, this time allowing prolonged study through the scope - such subtly beautiful birds. Slightly less distantly, a male Goshawk appeared above the trees, presumably a third individual, and this time views were more satisfactory as it soared above the forest, occasionally powering along on deep, slow wingbeats. A good mornings work, and now it was time for lunch!



Woodlark, 11<sup>th</sup> February

After lunch we spent a bit of time checking locations for the very mobile wintering Great Grey Shrike. We weren't able to locate it today, but we did get more good views of Marsh Tit in the process and at least enjoyed the sunshine! The best option though seemed to be to head back to Lynford, and have another go for the elusive Hawfinches. At the gravel pits, three fine Goosander showed beautifully from the hide, in the company of five Common Goldeneye, and a single Great Crested Grebe was also added to the list. A Common Kingfisher whizzed by, and perched at the edge of the lake in the overhanging trees, just long enough for everyone to scope it. Back in the Arboretum, we headed straight down to the paddock and along the eastern edge, and no sooner did we put our scopes down to start scanning than a Hawfinch flew from the trees in the paddock, to the conifers on the far side. We were slightly surprised and pleased to see three together in one view, and then two more flew in to join them! These all seemed to fly off left, and almost simultaneously three more were perched further to the right - could there have been as many as eight? Possibly, but we could only be definite on five. We skirted around to the far end of the paddock, and here the birds could be viewed in stunning evening light perched high in the tops, even doing a bit of 'ticking' before dropping further into the trees out of sight. A super way to end the day, with more close views of Nuthatch, Treecreeper and Marsh Tit on the walk back to the car park.



Hawfinch, Lynford 11<sup>th</sup> February

**FRIDAY 12TH FEBRUARY** - *Sunny spells and light winds, 5C*

A crisp frosty morning today and we started at the hide in Great Ryburgh where we saw about 40 Eurasian Wigeon and 35 Common Teal plus a few other common species, and a nice Little Owl was roosting in a roadside oak at the edge of the village. Our plan for the day was to concentrate on West Norfolk and try to catch up with some of the wintering specialities and farmland birds of the area, starting at a farm near West Rudham where we had super views of two Tree Sparrows and a couple of Brambling, plus a nice party of Bullfinches. Flitcham next and a chance to enjoy the superb flocks of wintering passerines in the cover crops there - stacks of Bramblings and Common Linnets and a few more Tree Sparrows too. Redwings and Fieldfares were feeding on the meadow and another Little Owl was sunning itself in the roots of the big fallen oak tree. A ringtail Hen Harrier drifted

across a distant sheep field - sadly not the wintering Pallid Harrier that has been frequenting the site during the day.



Tree Sparrow, West Rudham 12<sup>th</sup> February

Heading north towards the coast, our next target was the Rough-legged Buzzards which we had missed out on a couple of days earlier. We stopped along the Docking-Brancaster road, noting no fewer than ten Common Buzzards soaring together, and a Barn Owl, but not our main quarry. Taking Chalkpit Lane towards Titchwell, we found a couple of car loads of birders who informed us we were thirty seconds too late to see one of the buzzards, which had been perched in view for the last half hour! Thankfully it quickly reappeared, and we all managed to get on it with the scope as it circled behind some pines. After a bit of a wait, the Rough-legged Buzzard reappeared again and this time began soaring up above the trees and in beautiful light - we followed it with the scope for several minutes, gaining height with another kettle of ten Common Buzzard. The Rough-leg was regularly stooped on by the commons, and this encouraged it to fly closer to our position and give us some great views. Other species noted in the area included Grey Partridge and Yellowhammer, before we dropped down onto the coast road and headed to Titchwell for lunch.

Our visit to the reserve was a bit whistle stop today, as we had a date in the evening with the roosting Pallid Harrier. So after a quick glimpse of a very difficult Eurasian Woodcock in the scrub by the path, and very good views of a Water Rail in the ditch behind the feeders, we headed directly out to the beach. The drained marsh left of the West Bank path has been good for seeing pipits of late, and today we had good views of a single Water Pipit among ten or so Rock Pipits and a single Meadow Pipit. A nice chance to compare them all. As usual, the best spot for close-ups of waders was the brackish marsh, and here we had Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits, Dunlin, Common Ringed and





Rough-legged Buzzard, Choseley 12<sup>th</sup> February

Grey Plovers and a couple of Red Knot really close to the path in the afternoon sunlight. Pied Avocets and Northern Pintails were the pick of the bunch otherwise as we made our way out to the beach, where we were able to enjoy great visibility for scanning the sea. A party of Common Scoters were offshore, along with plenty of Common Goldeneye and a few Red-breasted Mergansers - we didn't hang around too long though, as time was ticking away. A Barn Owl was hunting really close to the path on the way back along the West Bank - so great to see a return to form for this species in the county this winter.

Our final throw of the dice today was to visit Roydon Common and try to connect with the wintering Pallid Harrier at its roost site - what a shock we had to find around 100 people here this evening and virtually nowhere to park! Heaven knows what it will be like here over the weekend! We walked out across the common on the main track to the vantage point overlooking the roost area, and quite soon two ringtail Hen Harriers circled in from high above and showed brilliantly in the late evening glow. Another bird came in soon after, but all went quickly to ground and about twenty minutes passed with no further activity and dark approaching rapidly. When the crowd was just starting to get twitchy, the juvenile male Pallid Harrier appeared from nowhere, just after a fifth Hen Harrier had dropped in, and we managed some decent flight views of it in the half light. It landed on a post for a few minutes, and then did a second fly-by, this time closer allowing detail of the collar and pale unstreaked peach underparts to be clearly seen. A great bird and a fitting end to our day around West Norfolk.

**SATURDAY 13<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY** – *Fresh Easterly winds and bitterly cold but dry*

Today was about trying to catch up with any missed species for our weeks total, and the biggest omission so far was Shorelark – a bird synonymous with Norfolk in winter but which, in recent years, has become infinitely more difficult to connect with. There has been two wintering groups of three birds this year, perhaps the most reliable of which spends its time on the high tide mark around the beach on the north side of Gun Hill dunes, a four mile round walk from the coast road at Burnham Overy Staithe. This would therefore be our destination for the whole morning, braving a biting east wind in search of our quarry. We tried to keep stops to a minimum on the walk out along Whincover track and out along Overy bank, but we did see scores of waders – Black-tailed Godwits feeding in

the grazing meadows with Dunlin, two Bar-tailed Godwits and several hundred European Golden Plovers. A couple of coveys of Grey Partridge were noted, and among the hordes of Pink-footed and Dark-bellied Brent Geese were seven Barnacle Geese – most likely of feral origin, but you never know! Two Red-breasted Mergansers were in Overy creek, with a further four seen later on, and passerines included Rock Pipit and Reed Bunting. Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Red Kite represented the raptors over the marsh, but surprisingly, we didn't see a Barn Owl. Reaching the dunes we headed straight over onto the beach – or what was left of it! The fresh east wind had whipped the sea up a bit, and on a spring tide the water was lapping the base of the dune, leaving us just enough sand to walk west on towards Gun Hill. Almost right away we could see what appeared to be a capsized boat in the water about two hundred metres offshore, but we couldn't quite make it out from our position – more on that later! The high tide line was littered with waders – Dunlin, Sanderling, Common Ringed Plover and Ruddy Turnstone, all at close quarters. We stopped to inspect them further, and three small birds dropped out of the sky and landed right in front of us – the Shorelarks! These delightful birds began hurriedly feeding among the dried seaweed for a few minutes, before both they and the waders took flight and headed way off towards Holkham – we had been lucky!



Shorelark and lifeboat rescue, Burnham Overy Dunes, 13<sup>th</sup> February





Our attention then turned to the aforementioned vessel offshore, a small dinghy type yacht, and now we could see the stricken skipper floundering in the water, attempting to right his sail but struggling in the freezing conditions. His mast seemed to be damaged, and we watched as he scrambled out onto the hull to escape the clutches of the cold water. We realised he was in trouble, and called the coastguard in order to scramble the Wells lifeboat into action. It turned out that both the crews were on exercises and the boats were already launched, so within moments they came racing from the east but struggled to spot the yachtsman in the deep swell. Thankfully we were able to speak with them via the coastguard and describe the position of the stricken yacht, which they duly found and rescued back to shore along with its fortunate skipper. An exciting episode, and we were frozen stiff by now, so can only imagine how cold he must have been! The walk back was distinctly less eventful, but there were now a lot of Brent Geese by the sea wall which were a fantastic sight.

We lunched at nearby Wells, trying unsuccessfully once again for both the Shag in the harbour, and the Tawny Owl in the woods – we did, amazingly, see our first Great-spotted Woodpecker of the week in the process. The wind was really strong now, so we abandoned our original plan of walking out to Stiffkey Fen and instead headed east along to Sheringham to try for the Purple Sandpiper. We couldn't find it this afternoon, despite the presence of plenty of Ruddy Turnstones – the tide was a bit low by the time we got there. The afternoon, and the tour, was wrapped up at Cley Coastguards, where a short seawatch added a few Red-throated Divers, several Northern Gannets and a Common Guillemot, taking the trip total comfortably over 130. We arrived back in Great Ryburgh around 1545 where the tour concluded.

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Red-throated Diver
2. Great Crested Grebe
3. Little Grebe
4. Red-necked Grebe
5. Northern Gannet
6. Great Cormorant
7. Grey Heron
8. Little Egret
9. Great White Egret
10. Mute Swan
11. Bewick's Swan
12. Whooper Swan
13. Greylag Goose
14. Canada Goose
15. Egyptian Goose
16. Brent Goose
17. Pink-footed Goose
18. Barnacle Goose
19. White-fronted Goose
20. Common Shelduck
21. Mallard
22. Common Teal
23. Eurasian Wigeon
24. Gadwall
25. Northern Shoveler
26. Northern Pintail
27. Common Scoter
28. Red-breasted Merganser
29. Goosander

30. Common Goldeneye
31. Tufted Duck
32. Common Pochard
33. Ferruginous Duck
34. Greater Scaup
35. Grey Partridge
36. Red-legged Partridge
37. Common Pheasant
38. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
39. Northern Goshawk
40. Common Kestrel
41. Peregrine
42. Merlin
43. Marsh Harrier
44. Hen Harrier
45. Pallid Harrier
46. Common Buzzard
47. Rough-legged Buzzard
48. Red Kite
49. Common Moorhen
50. Water Rail
51. Common Crane
52. Common Coot
53. Pied Avocet
54. European Oystercatcher
55. European Golden Plover
56. Grey Plover
57. Common Ringed Plover
58. Northern Lapwing
59. Dunlin
60. Sanderling
61. Red Knot
62. Ruddy Turnstone
63. Common Redshank
64. Spotted Redshank
65. Common Greenshank
66. Eurasian Curlew
67. Ruff
68. Common Snipe
69. Eurasian Woodcock
70. Black-tailed Godwit
71. Bar-tailed Godwit
72. Black-headed Gull
73. Common Gull
74. Herring Gull
75. Lesser Black-backed Gull
76. Great Black-backed Gull
77. Mediterranean Gull
78. Great-spotted Woodpecker
79. Green Woodpecker [H]
80. Barn Owl
81. Short-eared Owl
82. Little Owl
83. Common Guillemot
84. Woodpigeon



85. Collared Dove
86. Stock Dove
87. Skylark
88. Woodlark
89. Shorelark
90. Meadow Pipit
91. Rock Pipit
92. Water Pipit
93. Pied Wagtail
94. Winter Wren
95. European Robin
96. Common Stonechat
97. Dunnock
98. Common Blackbird
99. Redwing
100. Song Thrush
101. Mistle Thrush
102. Fieldfare
103. Cetti's Warbler [H]
104. Goldcrest
105. Blue Tit
106. Great Tit
107. Coal Tit
108. Marsh Tit
109. Long-tailed Tit
110. Treecreeper
111. European Nuthatch
112. Rook
113. Carrion Crow
114. Western Jackdaw
115. Magpie
116. Eurasian Jay
117. Common Starling
118. House Sparrow
119. Tree Sparrow
120. Chaffinch
121. Brambling
122. Greenfinch
123. Goldfinch
124. Bullfinch
125. Hawfinch
126. Linnet
127. Twite
128. Eurasian Siskin
129. Common Crossbill
130. Reed Bunting
131. Yellowhammer
132. Snow Bunting
133. Lapland Bunting

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