



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT NORFOLK 18TH – 23RD JANUARY 2016

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TUESDAY 19TH JANUARY - *Cold, bright and still, 4C*

The first day of our Norfolk five day tour began with a beautiful winters day and some really great birds! We planned to spend the whole morning in the vicinity of Burnham Overy Staithe, a superb year round destination that perhaps really comes into its own at this time of year with marshes thronged with wildfowl, waders and raptors. We notched a **Peregrine** belting across the road as we approached the A149, and this was in fact the first of four of this species we noted today. Parking at the staithe, we set off along the bank picking up our first Rock Pipit and then a little further on in the main channel, Red-breasted Merganser and Common Goldeneye. There were lots of Eurasian Wigeon and Common Teal in the channel too, and the mud was littered with Grey Plover, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit and even a small huddle of Red Knot. This area is one of the best on the coast for seeing raptors in winter, and we were delivered an early bonus as a dinky male **Merlin** came across the marsh and right over the bank in front of us. We could see it perched distantly on a sueada bush, but sadly it had moved on again by the time we got closer. Flocks of Brent and Pink-footed Geese were grazing the frosted fields inland of the seawall, and we also saw a few European Golden Plover and a single Black-tailed Godwit amongst them, Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier were easy to see as we headed further down the bank, and two Red Fox were chasing each other around on the grazing marsh - not a terribly common sight in this part of Norfolk!



Shorelark, Burnham Overy Dunes

Once at the dunes, we headed directly onto the beach, and then west along the strandline to look for the wintering party of three Shorelark which have been around since early last month. After the recent storms, the beach was awash with waders feeding on newly exposed mud and shingle and washed up razor clams - Dunlin, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone and Common Ringed Plover making up the bulk of them. We weren't sure where the Shorelarks came from, but they actually flew past us along the beach having seemingly come from the Holkham direction, and they promptly dropped on the bank of rotting seaweed right in front of us. We spent the next ten minutes or so enjoying close ups of these exquisite little birds, close enough to note that one of them has a damaged and bloodied eye, so perhaps has had a

close encounter with one of the local falcons. At the end of Gun Hill, the channel provided fantastic views of eight Red-breasted Mergansers, the males throwing back their heads and displaying to the females, while four more Common Goldeneye flew by with audibly whirring wings. A nice surprise overhead then came in the form of an immature **Eurasian Spoonbill**, heading west towards Burnham Norton. Thankfully it dropped on the saltmarsh next to a Little Egret and we were able to watch it distantly preening - the first of many we would no doubt see on the tours this year! The walk back gave us the chance to scan a close flock of Pink-footed Geese which had dropped in by the bank, and while we didn't find anything amongst them, a covey of Grey Partridge caught our eye and were a nice addition. A **Barn Owl**, hunting away in the distance, was eventually seen much closer perched on a fence post - always a lovely sight on a winters day.

Heading east along the coast by Holkham, we paused briefly on the A149 to check for **Eurasian White-fronted Geese** on the freshmarsh. With the light perfectly behind us, we were able to get good scope views of around seventy of these attractive geese, as well as a couple of Egyptian Geese, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Jay and Coal Tit. A little further on, by Lady Anne's Drive, another mass of feeding Brent Geese were seen, plus five different Common Buzzards and a beautiful **Barn Owl** hovering right by the drive. A mixed flock of waders included excellent views of Ruff, side by side with Common Redshanks for comparison, and three Common Snipe crouched among the tussocky grass. A great spot by one of the group was a male Bullfinch sitting in the hedge some way off, but clearly visible through the scope, and another **Peregrine** spooked everything off the marsh to the west before flying right overhead.

Wells harbour next and a whistle stop to look for wintering **European Shag** - normally these are immature birds, so we were pleasantly surprised to find a smart adult fishing around the new pontoon at the west end of the quay. There had been two Greater Scaup seen on the boating lake in recent days, so given the time this seemed like a logical place to call for lunch. We couldn't find the scaup on the partly frozen lake, but we managed to salvage something for our efforts as one of the **Tawny Owls** was in its roost nearby in the pines, and after some careful positioning we were able to see about two thirds of it through a scope! The afternoon was now wearing on quickly, and we had a decision to make about which way to head.

Cley won the toss, as a Grey Phalarope had been around for the last few days and was apparently showing currently off the East Bank - just time for us to head there and hopefully see it before dusk approached. The area known as The Serpentine on Pope's Marsh, now managed by the NWT, is looking excellent for a range of species again this year and it was packed with wildfowl and waders today. The phalarope had other ideas though, and apparently had flown east before we arrived. Some beautiful Northern Pintails and flocks of Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall and Shoveler were all across the marsh, while a big flock of Dunlin and a few Ruff were picking their way across the grass. At the back, a superb **Red-necked Grebe** floated out of hiding and began diving in what seemed an unusual spot for it among the flooded pools of the grazing marsh - a nice bird to add though and good views too. An adult male Marsh Harrier and a Common Stonechat were also seen, before we returned to the vehicle and took a quick drive along towards Salhouse, just in case we could find the phalarope on one of the pools there. We didn't, but as had been the order of the day, found something else instead - a wintering **Common Chiffchaff** along the edge of the track at the Iron Road.

Our final stop of the day was the car park at the end of Greenway Lane at Stiffkey, overlooking the saltmarsh at dusk. It was cold now, and the light was poor due to the encroaching mist out over the East Hills, which had almost disappeared by the time we arrived. Two ringtail **Hen Harriers** could be seen very distantly hunting the saltmarsh, and a third came in from the east and passed a bit closer. Another **Peregrine** was perched way out towards Blakeney Point, pretty well the last action of the day as the light was really fading. Our third **Barn Owl** of the day was sat on the hedge as we headed for home along the A149 towards Wells - an action packed first day!

WEDNESDAY 20TH JANUARY - *Cold, bright and still, 4C*

Another beautiful day of weather saw us hit most of our targets along the North Norfolk Coast, with views varying from sketchy to unbelievable! We headed first to Blakeney, stopping briefly on the way to view a small flock of Pink-footed Geese feeding in roadside fields near Langham. Once at Blakeney, we set off along the seawall, the stunning light illuminating Little Egrets like beacons on the saltmarsh.

A **Merlin** dashed across the track and chased a passerine high into the sky above Blakeney Point before dropping back down and landing on a sueada bush on the marsh. Unlike yesterdays bird, we were able to get a scope on this one - excellent! Our main target here were the recently reported **Lapland Buntings**, and we bumped into some other birders at the given spot, who had not had any luck so far. Common Stonechat and Reed Bunting were easy to find along the fencelines, and several Rock Pipits were about, plus a flock of Common Linnets, but no immediate sign of the buntings. All the small passerines in the area were very mobile though and we figured that staying where we were and scanning and listening was the tactic most likely to yield results. Sure enough, a dry rolling 'trrrrrrr' advertised the presence of a **Lapland Bunting** flying, and we picked three birds up overhead which were quickly joined by two more. They passed low over us calling two or three times, looking for somewhere to settle. Eventually two of them dropped quite close by, but sadly into dense grass - it wasn't going to be easy to see them there! Over the next hour, we managed a two second view of one in the open on the ground, plus a few more flight views, but they really were very difficult to see. They were generally keeping company with three Skylark, but we had an additional bonus as a party of seven **Twite** flew in and were slightly more obliging, perching up on a distant bush.

After a coffee back at the van, we pressed on to Cley in the hope that we might be more successful with the Grey Phalarope which we had missed yesterday. It had been seen at the new Babcock Hide on Pope's Marsh, so we parked by the Iron Road and headed straight there. The light was fantastic from the hide, and there just twenty feet away outside was the **Grey Phalarope**, feeding frantically in the wet mud - what a bird! Over the next forty minutes or so the bird showed superbly well, only briefly moving out onto the water in the centre of the pool. Two **Water Pipits** were also present, and gave excellent views around the reedy islands. Plenty of Dunlin, Ruff and Red Knot were in a mixed flock on the pool - a lovely spot and the first time we have visited on a tour. Surely one that will only get better once the spring migration gets under way.



Grey Phalarope, Cley

Our next stop was nearby Weybourne, for a quick stop to check for a mixed Redpoll flock which has been hanging around along the beach road. Initially all we saw were a few redpolls flying around calling, but then one dropped into the hedge right in front of us - a superb cold, frosty **Mealy Redpoll**. With patience, we had Lesser and Mealy Redpolls side by side in the scope perched in top of the hedge - a really nice opportunity to compare the two. The beach car park seemed like a good place to have lunch, especially with the sun shining, but we didn't see anything much at all offshore while we ate. At this time of year, the day wears on quickly, and so we had to push on to fit some more good birds into the day! This saw us head the short distance along to Sheringham seafront, as the tide was rising and this would give us a great

chance to connect with **Purple Sandpiper**. Sure enough, we found one feeding on the rocks below the Crown pub and had point blank views - a few Red-throated Divers passing offshore were also added.



Purple Sandpiper, Sheringham, and Barn Owl, Stiffkey

Blakeney Harbour has hosted one or two Great Northern Divers again this winter, not a terribly easy species to catch up with in the county, and so we headed down to Stiffkey Fen in order to view The Pit and outer part of the harbour over high water. Two **Common Greenshanks** were on the fen, pushed off the saltmarsh by the tide, along with about one hundred Black-tailed Godwits and the usual assortment of wildfowl. A fine male Marsh Harrier drifted over and a Common Kingfisher dazzled in the afternoon sunshine as it settled on the bank of the creek just in front of us. As has been the case everywhere along the coast this month, huge numbers of waders once again featured - big mixed flocks of Grey Plover, Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and Sanderling. Some superb Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Goldeneye were in the harbour but we couldn't see anything else in our initial scans. A big female Eurasian Sparrowhawk was feeding on a kill at the edge of the marsh, presumably a small wader plucked from the assembled throng, and a **Barn Owl** quartered the edge of the coastal path towards Stiffkey. Eventually, with much patient scanning, we found two **Great Northern Divers** off Far Point - distant but clear views of them feeding along the edge of the breaking surf. A ringtail Hen Harrier rounded things off nicely, hunting the saltmarsh towards Morston, clearly a young bird with the evening sun picking out its ochre underparts nicely. The **Barn Owl**, now joined by a second, perched on a post close to the seawall - the perfect end to a winters afternoon. But in fact we weren't quite done for the day, as the fine weather had stretched the day enough for us to call into Stiffkey Saltmarsh car park again to check in case we could get lucky with, for example, a Short-eared Owl! We parked, got out of the van and a **Short-eared Owl** flew right past in front of us, circling round once just to make sure we'd had excellent views, before heading off along Warham Greens. Top that!

THURSDAY 21ST JANUARY - Misty & frosty start, light winds and sunny spells 4C

Probably the coldest morning of the winter dawned today, and the heaviest frost - the countryside was white and shrouded in mist as we headed out this morning towards Abbey Farm at Flitcham where a juvenile **Pallid Harrier** has settled for the winter. The bird has been regular, but not easy to see, making brief appearances throughout the day hunting game strips and hedgerows around the farm. We arrived to find a superb mixed flock of farmland passerines feeding along the hedge - **Bramblings**, Yellowhammers,

Reed Bunting and Tree Sparrows. A **Merlin** dashed across the field, making for an excellent few days for this species - we saw it again later on hunting passerines overhead. Its larger cousin, the **Peregrine**, is also plentiful in Norfolk just now and we had cracking views of one passing over, scattering gulls, Lapwings, corvids and pigeons across the landscape. Common Buzzard could also be seen, and two male Bullfinch joined the throngs of finches in the game crop, but so far, no sign of the harrier. We stood around in the cold for as long as we could, and then decided to take a walk back down the lane, partly to warm up, and partly to check the mixed flocks again. This was a bad move - the Pallid Harrier floated by the spot where we had been standing, just moments after we walked away! Bugger! We decided that we just had to stick it out in the same spot, rather than moving around, and sure enough this tactic paid dividends as the bird made another pass, no more than one hundred metres away, across the field in front of us. We were happy with this, and returned to the car park for a coffee to get warm. Setting off in the van, we drove back along the lane towards Harpley just in case we bumped into it again, and found a car parked at the far end of the water meadow - they were watching the harrier. We looked in amazement to see the bird perched on the top of a dead hawthorn, only a few metres away in the field, the most amazing views any of us had ever had of this stunning raptor. We were able to get some pics, before spinning the van around and heading back towards the farm to alert everyone else, who thankfully all got to see it too before it flew off. Amazing!



Pallid Harrier, Flitcham

Choseley was our next stop, and continuing the raptor theme we wanted to spend some time looking for the wintering **Rough-legged Buzzards** in the area. This time we didn't have to wait, as one was perched in a hedge one field distant from Chalkpit Lane, and the second was hovering above - superb views in the scope. They disappeared behind a ridge, but we found them again by moving a short distance back down

the road, and saw one of them sitting in a grass field before it took off and flew along the hedge. Another **Peregrine** came hammering across the fields, chasing a Stock Dove which it narrowly missed, before heading off towards the coast. We couldn't find any Corn Buntings in the area, despite our best efforts, so we headed down to Thornham Harbour for lunch. The small **Twite** flock were buzzing around as we arrived, and they settled in the puddles right next to our vehicle - great views, and they remained in the vicinity while we ate lunch.



Twite, Thornham Harbour

Titchwell would be the destination for the rest of the afternoon, and we managed to add all our target birds here. The first was a **Eurasian Woodcock**, typically elusive among the tangled braches of the thicket between the car park and visitor centre. We managed to get its eye in the scope and that was about it! A couple more Brambling were at the feeders, and out along the West Bank path we had a quick scan of the freshmarsh, adding our first Pied Avocets of the week.



Spotted Redshank, Titchwell

We wanted to press on to the shore though, with the tide coming in, to see if we could pick up any seaducks. On the way, a **Spotted Redshank** gave stunning views on the brackish marsh, and we also had the chance to study Bar and Black-tailed Godwits at point blank range, side by side. Many Grey Plovers, Northern Pintails and Little Grebe were also seen before we reached the beach. Offshore, there were plenty of Common Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser, plus a single Common Scoter within range [a big flock of 2000+ were seen distantly on the skyline]. Otherwise the shore was quiet though, so we returned to the shelter of Parrinder Hide for a bit. The usual selection of wildfowl could be seen, plus lots of Dunlin and an adult male Marsh Harrier, but not a great deal else. Back along the main path, a **Water Rail** showed superbly in the ditch - a virtually guaranteed sighting here at this time of year - and a couple of Eurasian Siskins were in the Alders. Finally, at Patsy's Reedbed, two **Red Crested Pochards** were among the Gadwall, and a **Barn Owl** was hunting the far end of the reedbed to round off another good day.



Water Rail, Titchwell

FRIDAY 22ND JANUARY - *Fresh southerly winds and heavy rain, 7C*

What a difference a day makes! We headed East today to the Norfolk Broads, and we knew that heavy rain was on the way. We started with a short diversion off the A47 to Bowthorpe where a **Great White Egret** has been wintering again this year, and sure enough we found the bird rather distantly from the bridge near Spire Hospital. It spent most of its time hidden in a ditch with only its head visible, but occasionally popped up for better views. Continuing to Strumpshaw, we were surprised to find the main lagoon still half frozen despite today's milder temperatures, and there were lots of Gadwall and Shoveler here among the masses of Coot. A Great-spotted Woodpecker was our first of the week, as we headed down to Fen Hide for a reedbed vigil. We had hoped to connect with Bittern or Otter, or both, but failed on both counts - five Marsh Harriers and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk were the best we could manage. Cutting our losses, we headed off towards Great Yarmouth, via a short detour around Acle to check the fields north of the bridge unsuccessfully for Common Cranes. We arrived at Great Yarmouth to find the heaviest of the rain so far, and it was grim on the seafront - we only lingered long enough to

add **Mediterranean Gull** to our list. A Glaucous Gull had been in the area and so we visited a couple of its favoured spots, but couldn't find it - perhaps we had used up all our luck yesterday!

Heading north, we decided to divert to Ludham and check for the wild swan flock that is often in the area - at least we could do that without getting soaked! Thankfully the birds were present, and we enjoyed 110 **Bewick's** and about 25 **Whooper Swans** in the fields behind the BOC gas plant - a tractor flushed a small group of Whoopers, which flew past us trumpeting - superb. From here we took the coast road out to Winterton and parked in the driving rain on the beach car park to eat our lunch. Three of us then trudged north along the beach in order to find 'Barry's Buntings' - as local birder Barry Jarvis puts seed down for the **Snow Buntings** there. We met Barry, and saw the buntings - but only three today. They did include a fine male though, and close views too, so it made the trudge back into the rain more bearable!

Taking the coast road towards Horsey, we scanned the fields all along the road for Cranes without success, noting a few European Golden Plovers in the process. At Horsey Corner though, we found a big flock of Pink-footed Geese grazing in a grass field, and so pulled up to scope through them. Virtually the first bird we put the scope on was really dark, particularly below, and bigger than those surrounding it - a cracking **Tundra Bean Goose** [well gander actually, as it was clearly a male] with bright orange legs and bill band. It gave some excellent views and thankfully was at the front of the flock, otherwise we would have struggled to pick it out. Two **White-fronted Geese** were in the same flock, but unfortunately always at the back and partly hidden. They looked long-billed, with a lot of white on the forehead and through the gloom the bills seemed more orangey toned, but we couldn't be sure that they were Greenland birds, they were just too distant. A Common Kingfisher perched on a post in the field, and a real bonus called and flew overhead - a wintering **Green Sandpiper** which dropped out of sight into one of the ditches.

We ended the day at Hickling Stubbs Mill, and in fact the rain did clear briefly as we arrived - four **Common Cranes** flew distantly along the skyline by the old windpump just as we reached the viewpoint. We were greeted though by a quite amazing sight - 53 Marsh Harriers in the air together, circling above the roosting area! Perhaps the sodden afternoon had bedraggled them to such a degree that they were extra keen to take to the air once the weather abated. At least 75 birds roosted this evening, but that was probably a conservative estimate. A **Barn Owl** hunted distantly, a Common Kingfisher flew by and a flock of Fieldfares were seen. Finally, as dusk fell, four **Hen Harriers** suddenly appeared together - three ringtails and a fine male - always a good way to end the day.

SATURDAY 23RD JANUARY - *Light winds and sunny spells, 8C*

Our final day of the tour saw us heading south into Breckland to catch up with some of the forest and heathland species missing from our trip list so far. It was a beautiful day for the most part, which certainly made finding some of the key birds easier. It was a slow start though under grey skies in North Breckland, where we tried unsuccessfully for Northern Goshawk at a favoured spot. We only saw two Common Buzzards, but did add Grey Wagtail and Mistle Thrush to the trip list and saw Yellowhammer and a few Fieldfare too. Still, the raptors weren't really performing, so we headed further south into the forest to one of our favoured spots. Here we had more luck as the sun came out, picking a **Great Grey Shrike** out on the treetops at the far end of a forest clearing. These wide ranging winter visitors are regular in the forest each winter, but can be hard to find, ranging over miles of clear fell at times. We know this individual well though, and we were glad to catch up with it so easily today. A **Common Crossbill** flew low over us calling loudly, the only one we managed to catch up with today, and we also saw more Fieldfares and a pair of Common Stonechats. The shrike, in the meantime, disappeared altogether and we didn't see it again.

We still wanted to try and catch up with a Goshawk while the sun was shining, as they are already starting their territorial display flights above their territories around the forest, so we tried a spot which proved fruitful for us last year. Sure enough, a large raptor soon appeared above the conifers - a monster female **Northern Goshawk**! This impressive bird powered up into the sky above the woods, joining her partner, and they soared together in cracking light despite being fairly distant - we could even see the dark ear coverts on the male and fluffed white undertail. They were reluctant to indulge in full display, but instead drifted off in separate directions - a great showing though. After lunch, we spent some time checking spots for Woodlark, but didn't see or hear any at all - quite surprising given the nice weather - perhaps they are just not back on their territories just yet. A Green Woodpecker was some compensation.

The latter part of the afternoon was spent at Lynford Arboretum, and here we were able to catch up with common species such as Common Treecreeper, European Nuthatch and Marsh Tit. However, it was of course **Hawfinch** that represented our main target, and they have been very tricky this winter, with the mild weather and plentiful woodland food stocks rendering them elusive and disinterested in the feeding station. They have not even been appearing with any regularity to roost in the usual spot. So we were delighted and a little fortunate to find a single bird, a male, calling and showing nicely in the treetops at the far end of the paddocks. A fitting bird to round off what has probably been one of our best ever Norfolk winter weeks.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Red-throated Diver
2. Great Northern Diver
3. Great Crested Grebe
4. Little Grebe
5. Red-necked Grebe
6. Great Cormorant
7. European Shag
8. Grey Heron
9. Little Egret
10. Great White Egret
11. Eurasian Spoonbill
12. Mute Swan
13. Black Swan
14. Bewick's Swan
15. Whooper Swan
16. Greylag Goose
17. Canada Goose
18. Egyptian Goose
19. Brent Goose
20. Pink-footed Goose
21. White-fronted Goose
22. Tundra Bean Goose
23. Common Shelduck
24. Mallard
25. Common Teal
26. Eurasian Wigeon
27. Gadwall
28. Northern Shoveler
29. Northern Pintail
30. Common Scoter
31. Red-breasted Merganser
32. Common Goldeneye
33. Tufted Duck
34. Common Pochard
35. Red Crested Pochard
36. Grey Partridge
37. Red-legged Partridge
38. Common Pheasant
39. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
40. Northern Goshawk
41. Common Kestrel
42. Marsh Harrier
43. Hen Harrier
44. Pallid Harrier
45. Common Buzzard
46. Rough-legged Buzzard
47. Red Kite
48. Merlin

49. Peregrine
50. Common Moorhen
51. Water Rail
52. Common Crane
53. Common Coot
54. Pied Avocet
55. European Oystercatcher
56. European Golden Plover
57. Grey Plover
58. Common Ringed Plover
59. Northern Lapwing
60. Dunlin
61. Purple Sandpiper
62. Sanderling
63. Red Knot
64. Ruddy Turnstone
65. Common Redshank
66. Common Greenshank
67. Spotted Redshank
68. Green Sandpiper
69. Eurasian Curlew
70. Ruff
71. Common Snipe
72. Eurasian Woodcock
73. Black-tailed Godwit
74. Bar-tailed Godwit
75. Grey Phalarope
76. Black-headed Gull
77. Common Gull
78. Herring Gull
79. Lesser Black-backed Gull
80. Great Black-backed Gull
81. Mediterranean Gull
82. Great-spotted Woodpecker
83. Green Woodpecker
84. Barn Owl
85. Tawny Owl
86. Short-eared Owl
87. Common Kingfisher
88. Woodpigeon
89. Collared Dove
90. Stock Dove
91. Skylark
92. Shorelark
93. Meadow Pipit
94. Rock Pipit
95. Water Pipit
96. Pied Wagtail
97. Grey Wagtail
98. Winter Wren
99. European Robin
100. Common Stonechat
101. Dunnock
102. Common Blackbird
103. Redwing
104. Song Thrush
105. Mistle Thrush
106. Fieldfare
107. Cetti's Warbler [H]
108. Common Chiffchaff
109. Goldcrest

110. Blue Tit
111. Great Tit
112. Coal Tit
113. Marsh Tit
114. Long-tailed Tit
115. Treecreeper
116. European Nuthatch
117. Rook
118. Carrion Crow
119. Western Jackdaw
120. Magpie
121. Eurasian Jay
122. Common Starling
123. Great Grey Shrike
124. House Sparrow
125. Tree Sparrow
126. Chaffinch
127. Brambling
128. Greenfinch
129. Goldfinch
130. Bullfinch
131. Hawfinch
132. Common Crossbill
133. Linnet
134. Twite
135. Eurasian Siskin
136. Lesser Redpoll
137. Mealy Redpoll
138. Snow Bunting
139. Lapland Bunting
140. Reed Bunting
141. Yellowhammer

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