

Norfolk weekend 6th-9th February 2014

The dreadful weather of the first weeks of the year, which had already wiped out two events, left many of us with low expectations of this year's trip to Suffolk and Norfolk: in the event we got away remarkably lightly and were able to complete most of the outlined programme.

On Thursday, we met as usual at Ipswich for breakfast, sixteen hardy souls who had left home well before dawn. Our first test was to find Waxwings in a residential road there: the first arrivals were lucky, but the birds suddenly flew off. Next, the scenic underside of Sizewell power station lured us with reports of an (invisible) Iceland Gull, but an immature Kittiwake and a Grey Seal were some compensation. A vent pipe on the wall of the building housed a sleepy Peregrine, while two Black Redstarts played hide and seek under a wire fence. The main party then went a bit south to check North Warren, while three of us made a short visit to Minsmere, where a Merlin, a Sparrowhawk and Marsh Tits were the main rewards. The Blythburgh inlet then provided a range of roosting waders, which included Avocets.

Soon after this, a substantial wet front caught up with us, so the stop at Lowestoft Ness for Purple Sandpipers proved suitably unpleasant in torrential wind and rain. Fortunately five birds showed immediately and nobody needed to linger! Normally our next stop at Stubbs Mill roost is the highlight of the trip, but the idea of taking a real drenching simply defied common sense. Some of us decided instead to cruise the Horsey back-roads to try our luck. We had some success, in that two pairs of Cranes and some geese loomed out of the murk. I was lucky to make out a male Hen Harrier during in a lull in the rain, but this was truly desperate birding!

A dry and relatively calm Friday was something of a fragmented adventure... First, Mediterranean Gulls on Yarmouth beach, and then a long search in the dunes at the north end to locate some Shore Larks, but with an unexpected bonus of a flock of Snow Buntings too. An off-shore sandbank held a mass of seals, but it was impossible to see which species they were. Then we were off to the Waveney Forest to find the Rough-legged Buzzard, which was distant, but distinct, as were a Marsh Harrier and a Hare. Back up at Horsey, Pink-footed Geese were numerous and a ring-tailed Hen Harrier showed well in far better conditions. Some of us also spotted a Stoat. After that we set off for an unashamed twitch at the staithe near Martham, where we soon found the Glossy Ibis. A Two-barred Crossbill was feeding with twenty or so Common



Crossbills at Hoveton Hall, and some of the group were able to make it out in the grey light of the afternoon.

After that came the long run over to Hunstanton, during which it seems that most people found a hunting Barn Owl or two. We went via Cley to see the storm damage, and had a bonus close-up of Brent Geese feeding in evening sunlight.

On Saturday morning we braved the cliff at Hunstanton in a howling SW wind to see the Fulmars and a few waders and then were off to Titchwell in bright light.



Waders and ducks

were plentiful in the pools, with most of the expected species noted, including Avocet and Ruff, but with one unexpected Greenshank. The off-shore wind was very strong, but the dunes gave some shelter for sea-watching: there were numerous Goldeneyes and several moderate flocks of Common Scoters, which included one or two Velvet Scoters, easily distinguished at that distance by their white wing-patches.

The ditch by the visitor centre provided a real treat for Colin, in the form of a Stoat in full winter ermine. Later the same area provided some of us with a close Water Rail, while the visit concluded with sightings of a partially-hidden Woodcock by the path to the car park.

Three of us spent the late afternoon at Holkham, watching a large flock of Pink-feet and Wigeon. We later found a further large flock of Pink-feet and another of Brent Geese to the east of the drive. Meanwhile the others had dispersed to try other spots. There was some limited success at Salthouse, with an elusive Richard's Pipit in the dunes, and others managed to find the Parrot



Crossbills at Holt. Two car-loads of us spent a bleak, grey dusk at a much-altered Thornham Marsh, where we were rewarded by two Marsh Harriers and a Peregrine, but no owls. I have to say that the warmth of the Lifeboat Inn was very welcome after that!

On Sunday, pre-dawn saw some of us braving another big blow at Holme beach, with limited success -a couple of Fulmars, both scoters,

and one or two Long-tailed Ducks rocketing past in the wind. Two Red-breasted Mergansers were just off the beach, with a number of Curlews at the strand-line. Others went to a woodland site, with some success in the shelter of the trees.

The route home took in the Sandringham "triangle" where some were lucky with a Golden Pheasant. We saw three or four Fallow Deer cross the road as we left the area. The next stop was the village of Flitcham, where Tree Sparrows eluded all of us but the sharp-eyed John Lakin, but

where a massive flock of Chaffinches and Bramblings was well worth seeing. Two Grey Partridges and another Hare were a bonus, as was the Barn Owl which we spotted in an old oak in the Abbey Farm reserve. Later, Linford Arboretum failed us for Hawfinches, while a large flock of what appeared to be Siskins and Redpolls was frustratingly distant. Other small woodland birds were easy at the feeders and the odd Treecreeper was also noted.

After that it was the homeward road and a great sense of relief that the rain had held off for all but those few hours on Thursday. Yes, the trip-list, at about 130, was a bit lower than average, but it included some species which had not been listed on previous trips. Conditions were not ideal, but in the circumstances we had done very well. Thanks to Colin Wilson's hard work, it had been a great success in the end. Not least, we had all appreciated the great service of the staff at the Comfort Inn at Yarmouth, and of our hosts at the Burleigh, Hunstanton. And thanks must also go to the drivers who kindly ferried the rest of us around.

Ray Reedman