

WBC Farnes trip, 5-7 June 2015



Friday

For those who don't know, the Farne Islands are a long way from Suffolk. A very long way.

But, if you ain't out there, you won't see it, as the birding saying goes. So we went there.

Not only is it a long way, but it's also a gamble – quite often the weather can kick off and the boats don't sail, and things were not looking too bright for the Saturday, when we were planning to get out there. But this was Friday, and things could change.

We met up at Morrison's car park in Beccles and loaded up, with Jon Evans wearing the Captain's hat (and the chauffeur's, as it turned out). There was a bit of rain about, and Suffolk's drivers responded by crashing their cars on the A143, with two fairly severe accidents between Gillingham and Earsham. We got through just before the police closed the road, and started the bird count, which would be list one: only birds seen on the journey counted, there and back.

The hours and miles passed – up the A1, past Newcastle and the Angel of the North, looking like a white-tailed eagle stuck in the ground (this is, after all, a bird related trip...)

It gets less crowded north of The Toon, but there were still plenty of miles to Bamburgh, where we were staying, and at which we arrived at about 5pm. So, a quick check-in, then a 3 mile drive back to Seahouses harbour to check out the eiders.

There they were – little rafts of eider families, tame enough to come for bread and pose for pics. This was a very pleasant way to unwind from the journey, with a wander up the jetty giving up a few offshore gannets, auk species (presumably guillemot), passing puffins skimming the wave tops, shag, plus a few waders including sanderling and ringed plover. Time was getting on, and there was still more to do before beer-o'clock, so we took the bus up into the town, visited the chippy then headed just out of town to a nearby cliff edge to check for fulmar. Again, a pleasant stroll down to the beach, now at low tide with exposed rock pools, and along under the song of skylark, meadow and rock pipit, to check the nest sites.

Almost all the birds were kittiwake, which is fine enough – but with persistence, there was a pair of fulmar up there too, with sandwich tern and common gull adding to the aerial cast.

We headed back into town to visit the local Co-op and pick up supplies for the (hoped for) boat trip the next day and a quick pint at a very crowded but very pleasant pub before heading back to Bamburgh.

Seahouses is probably like a smaller Cromer, whereas Bamburgh is obviously a little more refined: one main street under the shadow of the impressive castle, sheltering the village cricket pitch, with small tea houses and craft shops. The hotel was a maze of staircases, with every available space turned into a bedroom, but comfortable with a certain old-world charm. Do you need to know about the subsequent local brewery product sampling? No, probably not. Very good though!



Bamburgh Castle



Not strictly necessary.....use the zoom!



WBC look for fulmars



What am i bid? Seven grand?



Saturday

Jon and I went out early to taste the weather – down to the castle and out to the beach. Man, it was blowing a hooley, and it might be time for Plan B – if we had one. Still, the walk through the dunes turned up sandwich and arctic tern, so a good start anyway.

After breakfast, we headed back to Seahouses, but – as suspected – the boat folks were planning to review the situation at 11am. Nothing

was likely to change though; this wasn't a wafty little wind, but a huge air mass moving east at quite an alarming rate and consistency.

And so for Plan B, which came together slightly on the fly. Firstly, up to Holy Island (Lindisfarne) via Budle Bay, where we stopped in the shelter of a slight rise and trees; shelter enough to get the scopes out. The tide was low, leaving creeks through the mudflats. Although not packed with birds, we got onto a distant red-breasted merganser, summer-plumage dunlin and curlew.

The trip out to Lindisfarne means crossing a causeway which is closed 2 hours either side of high tide, so we were good for a visit between 10am and 4pm. It's an odd journey – a road that disappears under the sea, past mud and eventually salt flats. This wind was becoming a bit of a caution though, as we headed up to what was once Aidan's saintly retreat, and is now obviously a tourist trap.

The best bet seemed to be to head round the edge to a beach on the leeward side of the island and do a bit of seawatching. Guillemot and gannet were evident, but it wasn't over-busy out there, so we braved the wind again and headed back to the bus.

The next bit of Plan B involved heading down to Amble, and the Low Hauxley reserve just south of the town. The reserve is the nearest fresh water to Cocquet Island, which is maintained as a tern colony, including roseate tern, which was our new target.

We got on the beach facing the island, which had tern nests all over it, but with the wind and shaky scopes, identifying roseates was impossible, although there were an awful lot of terns out there.

Finding a pair of rock pipits feeding a fledgling who was having trouble maintaining its position on the cliff side in the wind gave Jon and Gavin a rare chance to get photographic though.

We headed further south to the small lane that tapered out to a footpath leading to the reserve, which was – unbelievably – shut! Some kind of construction work was underway, but we found a spot to overlook the water. A previously-unconfirmed roseate sighting (I think only I saw it, so that means 'unconfirmed') became confirmed sighting, with all of us getting over this beautiful, streamlined bird sailing over our heads. Now that was a great moment, and almost worth the soaking we got on the walk back, particularly when you add in little gull, which was consorting with the terns on a small island in the middle of the reserve.

A small coffee house in Amble was trying to close for the day – until WBC walked in, looking for a brew and a dry-out. The weather was not conducive to further birding, so it was back to base, where we'd booked

a table in a local pub (and there was another couple of local brews for myself, Jon and Alastair to check out). A very pleasant evening ensued, with increasing optimism about Sunday's weather and the chance to get out to the islands before the drive back.



The causeway to Holy Island



Lindisfarne



Sea watching at Lindisfarne



Sunday

Hooray! The wind had dropped as Jon and I took the early stroll down to the beach; it was still there, but hopefully the boats would cope with it. And indeed they did. We paid for the half-day trip and got on board, seen off by a sparrowhawk in the car park, with the warning that it was likely to be a bit choppy once we cleared the harbour, with a bit of splash about. No matter – bring on the seabirds!

Before long we were in the company of commuting puffins, guillemots, razorbills, terns (common arctic and sandwich), gulls, shag and cormorant. It's always amazed me on sea trips how birds of a pelagic disposition completely ignore the presence of boats and just get on with the business of sand eel collection.

The destination was Staple Island, with a quick scoot round some of the closer islands. Hitchcock comes to mind with the ranks of guillemots and razorbills standing like sentries along the clifftops.

We landed at Staple, and it was a quick scramble up the rocks (and via the National Trust ticket people) to a strange landscape of mainly flat-topped rock, marked out with blue rope to dissuade you from plummeting over the edge, in a strongly guano-tinged atmosphere. Imagine sticking your head in a chicken coop, and you've got it close. These birds don't like to travel far to the toilet.

The sheer numbers take some absorbing. Guillemots are the most numerous, with quite a few bridled birds, sporting the 'white spectacles' quite evident amongst their plainer brethren. Plenty of razorbills too, with

puffins further up on the softer ground, coming back with beaks full of sand eels before hopping rabbit-like into their holes.

On the evidence of this trip, food seemed to be plentiful this year, with an almost constant to-and-fro from the food source to the island.

What also was fairly surprising was the other bird species out here, including pied wagtail, swallow and song thrush.

We were out there about an hour, by which time the aroma has got completely into the back of your throat. I could still smell guano about 4 hours later.

So then it's back into the boat, a quick look at Grace Darling's lighthouse home, admiring the control of a lesser-black backed gull as it maintained position above the aft of the boat as Gus threw it bits of sandwich, and back to harbour. Then of course, the quick trip home, and the road list continues...

Well, we had to wait for it – but it was worth it.

Big thanks to Jon Evans for leading a great trip, which ended up taking in a lot more than we intended, but gave many of us a quick overview of some of the better birding sites of the north east coast. And thanks indeed for all the driving!

Paddy Shaw

And now..... THE LIST:

	Species	BTO Code
1	Herring Gull	HG
2	Lesser Black-backed Gull	LB
3	Great Black-backed Gull	GB
4	Common Gull	CM
5	Black-headed Gull	BH
6	Little Gull	LU
7	Kittiwake	KI
8	Common Tern	CN

9	Arctic Tern	AE
10	Sandwich Tern	TE
11	Roseate Tern	RS
12	House Martin	HM
13	Sand Martin	SM
14	Swallow	SL
15	Swift	SI
16	House Sparrow	HS
17	Greenfinch	GR
18	Chaffinch	CH
19	Goldfinch	GO
20	Dunnock	D.
21	Wren	WR
22	Robin	R.
23	Blackcap	BC
24	Chiffchaff	CC
25	Yellowhammer	YH
26	Whitethroat	WH
27	Willow Warbler	WW
28	Stonechat	SC
29	Goldcrest	GC

30	Pied Wagtail	PW
31	Great Tit	GT
32	Blue Tit	BT
33	Linnet	LI
34	Blackbird	B.
35	Song Thrush	ST
36	Wood Pigeon	WP
37	Collared Dove	CD
38	Feral Pigeon	FP
39	Stock Dove	SD
40	Eider	E.
41	Tufted Duck	TU
42	Mallard	MA
43	Shelduck	SU
44	Gadwall	GA
45	Great-crested Grebe	GG
46	Red-breasted Merganser 	RM
47	Mute Swan	MS
48	Greylag Goose	GJ
49	Canada Goose	CG
50	Egyptian Goose	EG

51	Jay	J.
52	Carrion Crow	C.
53	Rook	RO
54	Jackdaw	JD
55	Magpie	MG
56	Great-spotted Woodpecker 	GS
57	Green Woodpecker	G.
58	Buzzard	BZ
59	Kestrel	K.
60	Sparrowhawk	SH
61	Red Kite	KT
62	Meadow Pipit	MP
63	Rock Pipit	RC
64	Skylark	S.
65	Reed Bunting	RB
66	Wheatear	W.
67	Puffin	PU
68	Guillemot	GU
69	Razorbill	RA
70	Gannet	GX
71	Fulmar	F.

72	Shag	SA
73	Cormorant	CA
74	Sanderling	SS
75	Dunlin	DN
76	Redshank	RK
77	Grey Plover	GV
78	Lapwing	LA
79	Grey Heron	H.
80	Coot	CO
81	Oystercatcher	OC
82	Curlew	CU
83	Turnstone	TT
84	Pheasant	PH
85	Red-legged Partridge	RL



WBC at seahouses



Fully waterproof Capt Ivan...



guillemots on cliff



Sandeels - they go right through ya!



razorbill



At home with the Fulmars



Shag on nest