

WBC - North Norfolk Birding Trip
1-7 November 2014

Well, the programme announced a 'weekend in North Norfolk, where the migration will be far from over....'

However, after Kathy wheeled and dealt accommodation that could hold 15, and got the place for a week, it suddenly became necessary to book some time off.

The 5 or 6 days that followed our arrival at the house called 'Madge' in Montague Road, Sheringham included some of the most exceptional birding in East Anglia most of us had experienced in many a year. At times it seemed more like one of the WBC foreign trips in the numbers of exceptional birds we found.















And also, the numbers – Pink-footed Geese by the thousand, Golden Plover flocks that made marshes look they were covered in golden syrup, Gannets and Scoter all over the sea, Brent Goose fly-bys, hundreds of Oystercatchers at Wells etc. etc. etc.

But also, the numbers of the unexpected. Seeing over 200 Bonxies in one sitting, with Pomarine and Arctic Skuas and Little Auks as support for example.

And then there were the exceptional individuals – Yellow-browed Warblers, Rough-legged buzzards, Surf Scoter, Great White Egret, Hen Harrier.



Yellow-browed-Warbler (*Moss Taylor*)

Perhaps we should have known, from the early-morning cup of tea moment on Sunday outside the kitchen door to find the garden already occupied – by a Yellow-browed Warbler! There were maybe 100 other gardens it could have been in, but I think it was sent – like in some Shakespearean production of epic proportions – to deliver the prologue. A lot of us may have come from Suffolk, but on this occasion – you have to hand it to Norfolk.

(However, to keep it even-handed: it was Suffolk that provided the Desert Wheatear at Lowestoft for three of us, while the trip clock was still ticking on the Friday!)

This report departs from the norm. It includes contributions of ‘top moments’ from some of those who were there, quite a lot of pics and some consideration of some of the sites we visited. It would have been impossible to record all the great things that happened, and would have required a full-time scribe. However, I hope that it captures something of what was a truly exceptional week.

Of course, a huge thanks to Kathy for all the organisation and great breakfasts (prepared while we were sea-watching), to Steve P and Steve H for the leadership, and to Moss Taylor for the great day at Titchwell (and for vocalising a Cetti’s Warbler alarm call to bring a rival

up to a reed stem, tail all cocked like a big brown wren and ready to take him on!)



Holkham beach (Lesley Walduck)

Top Moments

Some of the group give their own 'top moments' reports – *Keith (his words are spoken by an actor)* We had gone to Wells Woods on the last full day of the trip to try and get to our target of 150 species, and we had three to go. The pagers had told us there was a Pallas' Warbler here, and that's what we'd come for, as well as some more obvious birds we hadn't run into yet, including Song and Mistle Thrush.

We didn't get the Pallas', but picked up on some Grey Partridge and put up a couple of Woodcock, as well as clearing the 150 with the thrushes and a Blackcap.

The great moment, however, was when a juvenile but beautifully marked Rough-legged Buzzard sailed slowly over our heads. He was heading into a strong west wind, and seemed to be hardly moving – he almost seemed to have stopped. You didn't need binoculars he was so close, and it was like looking at the Collins Guide, with all the characteristic markings incredibly clear.

The bird is rare enough, but to get a sight like that – and as close as that – may only happen once in your life. [/tab] [tab] I knew the week was going to start well when we all had great views of a Yellow-browed Warbler in the back garden of the house in Sheringham!

My favourite moment was when I had just sat down in the Tower Hide at Holkham (hadn't even raised my bins) and saw an enormous bird flying low near the hide, being mobbed by a Marsh Harrier. Steve Howell shouted 'Rough legged Buzzard!!' and the rest of our group who had been on the track came haring up the steps and got a good view of the buzzard perched up. It was a beautiful majestic bird and it really raised

my spirits as we'd had the mother and father of a drenching that day, dried off and then had another drenching!

My favourite bird was the Firecrest – we were walking back to the car park along the track at Holkham and stopped to look at a tit/crest flock in the conifers – suddenly Steve Howell (again) shouted 'Firecrest!' and everyone raised their bins to see the gorgeous little bird flitting around, hovering and shimmering like a Christmas tree decoration. It was so confiding, and put on a real performance for us flashing its crest time and again and being a real show off.

Derek's favourite moment was seeing the cooked breakfast that Kathy had prepared for us all. What a star! [tab] [tab]Sea watching is a special birding art and the compulsion to sit in a cold, windy sea-front shelter, possibly liberally splattered by driving rain, on a hard seat and slowly turning to stone as the hours go by is not everyone's cup of tea.

It wasn't mine until a day of tremendous spectacle as wave after constant wave of birds tore past us driven by a fierce northerly – ducks west and everything else east. At first the shouts from the other birders in the shelter were pretty meaningless and it was hard to find the dots above or below the horizon, near or far. By slow degrees things made more sense and by the end of the day, although I could hardly climb the steps back up to the town and the promise of a hot bath, I had begun to distinguish a few things.

The Gannets, adults and juvenile became easy. Two Short-eared Owls came in high and slow and sometimes a Little Auk rested among the breakers near to us for a while, mere dots before bravely taking off again. Well, lots more of course and now somehow I have a bit of a taste for sea watching but will such an exciting day come again very soon ?

Early in the week we were sitting in a hide at Cley. It was the last area for us to explore that day and the main interest was the gull roost.

Thanks to a well known expert in these matters who we all know, a Caspian Gull and possibly a second was found. The previous day, from the the beach hide we had seen three Grey Phalarope and this evening to our delight, they again performed their characteristic circling and feeding behaviour.

The wind had dropped and the sky had cleared, the light faded and it was time to leave. As we stepped into the darkening norfolk landscape the sky was streaked and glowed with autumn colours. There was the sound and sight of thousands of Pink Footed Geese high above with

their intersecting skeins moving to the west to their night time roosting sites. As we walked through the reeds there was the rustling sounds of hundreds of roosting Starlings.

It was the last day, and our numbers were diminished to five, the rump of the WBC Norfolk trip 2014! We were at Wells Wood. We are 3 short of the magic 150 species which is soon resolved with sights of winter thrushes and Woodcock. Earlier in the week we had encounters with wintering Rough-legged Buzzards but these experiences were eclipsed by an astonishing view of a RLB gliding over us, head to wind and unconcerned by our presence. We could see clearly in text book clarity its fantastic colouring, shape and aerial movements.[/tab]

[tab]When you have just had one of the most amazing weeks of Norfolk birding in your whole life – a week packed with many scarce and at least one rare bird, a week capped off by a seawatch which will easily go into your top five ever and a week full of beautiful birds everywhere you looked, it is to say the least, somewhat difficult to compact all of these many highlights into just a few short paragraphs.

So to begin with I have to mention the obvious highlight. Had I taken time to read the small print in regards to the fantastic and spacious Sheringham holiday home where we stayed, I would have noticed after paragraph 23b of the legal occupancy standings, clause 23c which surely would have read something like “All Yellow-browed Warblers must be observed while they are calling in the garden on the first day of your holiday!” What an amazing start!

The first full day was rather inclement and a major soaking had to be endured in the completely exposed (no naturist pun intended) area of Holkham Bay which almost seemed like a trial and tribulation that had to be experienced before the great birding week commenced – and what a week it was – with three scoter species in the same field of view through the scope, a total clean-up of all the species of winter raptors in the area, beautiful birds like Firecrest, Short-eared Owl, Long-tailed Duck and Arctic Tern, and a spectacular all-day seawatch packed with Pomarine, Great and Arctic Skuas, Little Gulls, Kittiwakes, Little Auks, Gannets and shearwaters.

On a rather more subtle note, one of the other unexpected highlights for me occurred while I was calling out the log at the end of the last full day. It was a good day but clearly the bubble had burst on our run of amazing days. Therefore, I was really pleased and heartened to hear how happy Paddy, Keith, Rob and Helen were over having had great views of a low down flyover Rough-legged Buzzard at Wells Dell. The day before,

myself and Steve P had already had fantastic views of Rough-legged Buzzards in the dunes at Burnham Overy and on the back of those sightings, I kind of took this one for granted, forgetting that this was the first really amazing view for the rest of the party.

There wasn't any real downsides to the holiday for me, apart from a frustrating moment at Cley when I picked up a very well concealed Jack Snipe in my scope. Only myself and Rob were in the hide at the time – the others were outside watching the Starling roost. I quickly bolted to the door to alert everyone to the birds presence but by the time everyone was back in the hide, the bird had crept back into deep cover and was never seen again. However, there is an upside to this story. Myself and Keith tried for it again first thing the next morning. Unfortunately, it still didn't show but instead we got a bonus Bittern tick right at the last knockings of the holiday when this cryptic beauty flew over the reedbed, so in the end, all well that ends well!

Rather than one experience, this was one that ran throughout the week, but rose to a peak on the Wednesday.....

The house was within 5 minutes of the seawatching shelter and it was a great way to start the day, every day. I only started to get into this particular specialism last winter and it's not easy. Initially the sea always looks empty – it's only when you start getting your eye in you start to see the activity out there.

But we knew a north wind was coming on the Wednesday, and sure enough, the shelter soon filled up.

What happened next was exceptional. The lonely country road that was the North Sea became a motorway, with most of the traffic in one direction. WBC chaps had to get used to shouts of 'going South' becoming 'going East' and it was easier to deal with right and left. Want to start learning the jizz of Bonxie and Pom Skua? Or the difference between Manx and Sooty Shearwater? Or see how many Gannets you could count? Or what a Little Auk looks like close up? Or the difference between Common and Velvet Scoter? Well, you should've been there....i'd love to think a seawatch could be like that again, but wonder if it could. Just check the species lists (and the numbers) for Wednesday!

[tab]Funniest moments:

Granty's phone: After purchasing herself a plush new mobile phone, John Grant's daughter Mhari gifted her old "Blackberry" to her poor ol' dad. Initially, he was grateful for his gift, but his appreciation soon

dwindled when he realised that some of the buttons didn't work, including an ability to turn down the volume of the ring tone or an option of turning the phone off or on!

Group intelligence revealed that an impressive gull roost was gathering each evening in front of Dorcas hide at Cley. In military fashion, we marched down to see what would come in and as we had Granty, Suffolk's fourth best gull expert, we were confident of seeing some real specialities. Granty was appointed Captain and was therefore awarded prime position on a front seat in the hide. We took his professional lead and clustered around the masterful one in awe as the gulls began to join the roost.

As the gulls came in, more and more birders arrived until there was standing room only and then there was little of that left, so we could say that the hide was bursting at the seams! We were all scanning the roost intently when suddenly and very noisily Captain Granty's phone went off to the tune of "all the nice boys like a sailor"! He was highly embarrassed about this intrusion and was forced to retreat from his prime position and shuffle out of the hide to answer the call, giving grovelling apologies to all and sundry as he went! It was Mhari who wanted to talk to her dad about something trivial! He managed to rid of her fairly quickly to reclaim his prime position. He had just about settled down to continue his scan when his phone went off again. There were lots of moans as Granty again noisily egressed the hide to answer his phone. This time it was his wife Sheena and his first words to her were "bloody phone" to which Sheena retorted "well if that's your attitude" and hung up! Granty immediately rang her back to apologise for his mister meaner, but Sheena had switched off her phone in disgust! There then followed a period of intense grumbling as our captain knew he was in the doghouse! Despite such major distractions, we managed to find a couple of Caspian Gulls and one Yellow-legged Gull, so not a bad evening's gull watch!

Some ol' twitcher's here to see our Yellow-browed!: Before we set off for our "Big Brother" house in Sheringham ready for our week's birding, I spoke to local birder Moss Taylor to gather birdy intelligence. He gave me a few hints about where to look and I suggested that we took his mobile number so we could ring him if we found anything. Fat chance he must have muttered under his breath and said "don't worry I hardly ever use it, just put any bird finds on the line".

Some of us were up before dawn and sipping tea in the back garden on our first morning ready for daybreak and a pre-breakfast seawatch, when we heard the distinct call of a Yellow-browed Warbler. The few early-risers present were soon onto the bird and good views, albeit in gloomy light, were enough to clinch its visual ID. Not so good news for those still in bed though as the bird soon flitted away into neighbouring gardens. We put our find on the line, as Moss had suggested, and departed for the shelter for a seawatch. Not much was seen offshore during our two-hour vigil, so we returned to the house for breakfast. Those who had stayed behind still hadn't relocated the bird, so we all got tucked in to our full English. After breakfast, there was a call that the Yellow-browed was back and this time we were rewarded with stunning views as it appeared in full sunlight to the whole group. Again, we put out news that the bird was showing well and got ourselves ready for our day's excursion to Holkham Gap to look for a Surf Scoter, which had been present for several days. As we were loading our gear in the car, there was a call that some ol' twitcher is here to see our Yellow-browed. It was none other than Moss Taylor who managed to get some superb photographs of the bird.



Desert Wheatear at Lowestoft (Steve Howell)

Top Sites

Paddy has also described the birding at two of the top sites, Holkham and Cley – see below.

Monday had been a tough day at Holkham. The beach is a risky spot to get in the middle of when the weather is a bit dodgy, and that's what it

became. There are hides on the marsh side of the Holm Oaks, but once you go through 'The Gap' and hit the beach, there's nowhere to hide. The rain decided to wait til we were right out there to really give it some, and we huddled together like Emperor Penguins, as there seemed no point in doing anything else.

It had still been a great day, and at least I got a Neil Sedaka parody out of it: 'Oh, I see Scoters in the rain – walking hand in hand with a one-eyed dove....'

Tuesday was completely different. We'd already had a splendid morning at Titchwell with Yellow-browed Warbler (almost as soon as we were out of the visitor's centre) Hen Harrier and fantastic displays by a huge flock of Golden Plover and another spell of seawatching. So perhaps we weren't owed anything else, but it just went on and on.

A low tide at Holkham means a long walk to the tide line, but worth it for Surf Scoter; the Jimmy Durante of the sea duck world. Remember those fake plastic noses you could put on, with elastic round your head? Well, that's our feller. Bobbing about in the company of Velvets, which would be enough to write home about on their own.

After further thrills courtesy of Med Gull and Arctic Tern, we split up. The Steves headed further up the beach and got Snow and Lapland Bunting, the main group headed towards the Joe Jordan Hide (I wondered where he'd gone since Tottenham!) and Keith and I split the difference.

Collectively, we got some splendid views of a perched Rough-Legged Buzzard and a long view of Great White Egret.

The Holkham hides and Titchwell – between Monday and Tuesday – had provided nearly a full-house of raptors, with Peregrine, Merlin, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk, Marsh Harrier, Barn Owl, with Short-Eared Owl coming off the sea at Salthouse, where Steve P, Keith and I had migrated to after the epic Wednesday seawatch to try and find Shorelark in a fearsome onshore wind.

On the way back we stopped off at Warham Greens for a raptor roost – perhaps slightly late with the light almost gone, but enough to get Hen Harrier and Merlin before it got too dark. [tab] [tab]Cley Marsh is one of those 'needs no introduction' birding sites. It was also the first reserve I was thrown off when I was 20, (no, sorry – it was Minsmere two years before....) when the warden mistook me for an egg thief.

We were there for Grey Phalarope and Spoonbill, which we'd picked up on through Twitter and the various electronic devices of the modern birder.

A quick trudge across the shingle from the Beach car park to the North Pool towards the – presumably temporary – blind that has replaced the ‘Swarovski’ Hide, taken out by the surge at the end of last year. The Spoonbill didn’t take long to ‘get’, and the Phalaropes not much longer. Three of them, circling like little clockwork toys, with some kid’s thumb stuck on the wrong button of a remote control. They seemed to be creatures of habit, despite not being at home, swapping their time between a spit of mud and a creek running to the left of us. Lovely little birds, with a unique character, and constantly busy, although they were aware of the clock ticking.

There was also a kingfisher on the creek running east from us, good views of rock pipits perched, a late wheatear and over 500 golden plover. But this was just a flying visit, because we were off to Holkham..... We returned to Cley later the next day, with John Grant with us, to ‘go through the gulls’ from the hides overlooking Simmond’s pool, with their weird horizontal struts that are either too high or too low for scopes....if you’re 5’8”. Gulls are a patient business – checking walls of white, grey, black, yellow for tell-tale head shapes, postures, speckling on napes or heads etc. But while John did the checking for us, we got entertained by our little phalarope friends again, just as busy with the light fading, only to have attention pulled back to a 2nd year Caspian that he’d found. There were actually two amongst the large roost in front of us.

A third trip took place on the Thursday night. Steve and Kathy had left on Wednesday evening to get to Wales for Derek Moore’s funeral, so with Steve Howell leading the pack of 5, we dropped in at Bishop’s Hide to check for a reported jack snipe (the subject of Steve’s ‘top moment’ report, so I’ll leave that for him.



Seawatching before the-rain (*Paddy Shaw*)

Species Lists (by day)

- [Sheringham 1 November 2014](#)
- [Sheringham 2 November 2014](#)
- [Sheringham 3 November 2014](#)
- [Wareham Greens 3 November 2014](#)
- [Choseley Barn Titchwell 4 November 2014](#)
- [Cley 4 November 2014](#)
- [Sheringham 4 November 2014](#)
- [Titchwell 4 November 2014](#)

- [Salthouse 5 November 2014](#)
- [Sheringham Sea Watch 5 November 2014](#)
- [Cley 6 November 2014](#)
- [Holkham 6 November 2014](#)
- [Sheringham 6 November 2014](#)
- [Sheringham Sea Watch 6 November 2014](#)
- [Wells 6 November 2014](#)
- [Cley 7 November 2014](#)
- [Walcott 7 November 2014](#)



Counting Oystercaters (*Paddy Shaw*)