

Suffolk – Sunny or Soaking? 26-30 March 2018

Sandbach U3A Birdwatching Group

Sixteen participants met up at Nene Washes to start out Birdwatching Trip to Suffolk.



Nene Washes by Carole Kynaston

While it was cold it started out mainly sunny. An early sighting was a pair of Cranes out on the Washes, and all members quickly had scope views of our main target here. We walked west in the hope of getting better and closer views of the Cranes, but they vanished presumably into a ditch, and we didn't see them again. We did pick up a Red Kite (to add to a number seen en route), with another a short time later in front of us. The pool to the west of Eldernell Farm kicked off our wildfowl list with Shelduck, Shoveler, Wigeon, Tufted, Gadwall and Pochard. Marsh Harrier was seen low over the River Nene and we added Buzzard and Kestrel to our raptor list. Great Spotted Woodpecker was heard from Lord's Holt wood, and Green Woodpecker yaffled from south of the lake. While eating lunch in the cars, Little Egrets were spotted some distance out on the Washes.

We drove on and very soon passed a field at March Farmers, still with a herd of Whooper Swans in residence. We reached our hotel around 1630 and settled in.

Tuesday was showery and was also the day set aside to visit one of the RSPB's flagship reserves, Minsmere. With its eight hides, it was an ideal place in which to dodge the showers. We started at

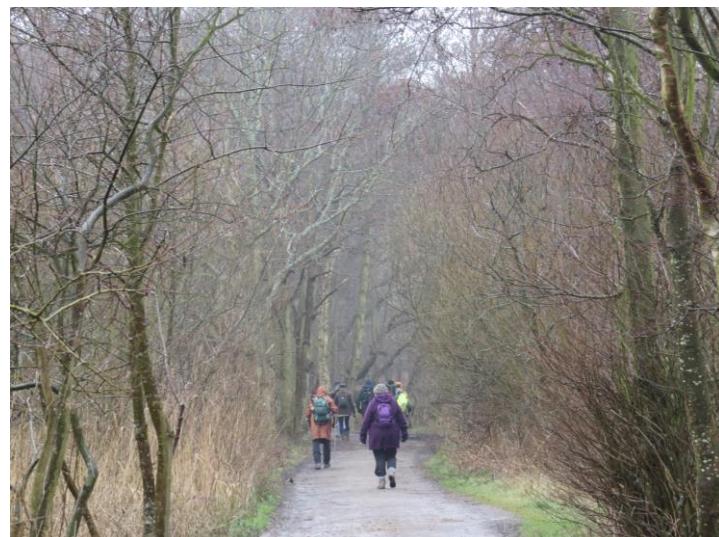


The iconic Avocet

the North Hide, picking up Redshank, Lapwing, Avocet, Dunlin and Black-tailed Godwit. And added Pintail and two redhead Smew to our wildfowl list. We saw the first of several Marsh Harriers for the day, including distant to close views as they sometimes quartered the reed beds.

We continued around the Coast Trail, which encircles the scrapes at Minsmere recording a couple of Turnstones on the East side, where we also found good numbers of Mediterranean Gulls. At the South Hide we were close enough to one Med Gull, which obligingly stood next to a Black-headed Gull, to discuss the points of difference between the two. With plenty of the scarcer species about, it was easier to pick out one or more of those points, and to gain experience in doing so.

We wandered on, meeting a small Barnacle Goose flock around the Sluice area, with Little Egret there too, and Little Grebe on the lagoons. Reaching the Woodland Trail we turned left towards the Bittern Hide, now in drizzly conditions, where we spent our last hour and a half on the reserve looking for the Hide's namesake. No Bitterns came out to play, Reed Bunting being the best we could manage. Back to the Visitor Centre, which completed our Coast Trail.





0

Blue Tit and Chaffinch on the Feeder

We paused at the feeders outside reception, watching the Tits, Pheasants and Finches at the free feast. And were a little surprised when an out-of-the-ordinary Tit came down to seed on a retaining wall – some discussion led to the identification of a Marsh Tit, confirmed by the Reception Staff as the only one of the Marsh/Willow pair to be present at Minsmere. The last carload to leave crossed the bridge into Eastbridge and spotted the long-staying Glossy Ibis in the wet fields. Flashing headlights brought the second to last carload reversing to view this beast, and we went back to the hotel very happy



Glossy Ibis

Wednesday dawned threatening heavy rain for the day. For once the forecast was accurate. As we were scheduled to spend another half day at Minsmere, this option was brought forward to allow us again to dodge the rain between the hides. As we passed through Eastbridge, the Glossy Ibis was still in place, allowing all members to catch up with this stunner. Staying close to the Visitor Centre, we started out at North Hide again, in an attempt to find the reported Jack Snipe. Despite the able assistance of a Minsmere regular, Jack Snipe did not slink on to our list, although we did discover several Common Snipe. The second half of the morning was spent in the Bittern hide. A Water Rail scuttered across one of the lanes cut into the reed bed, but it was over an hour before our main quarry put in an appearance, out to the left of the hide from where it flew further to the left.



A second Bittern flew diagonally from right to left and was chased by a Marsh Harrier, just pitching into the reeds as the Harrier stooped. Feeling elated, we made ready to sally forth into the rain when a glance over the shoulder revealed another two Bitterns flying from left to right

Our next stop, on the basis that a hide was present and could be used as shelter, was Walberswick National Nature Reserve. The rain eased a little as we prepared to walk out to this hide. The tide was out on the Blyth estuary and a number of wader species could be seen from the path including Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Oystercatcher and Redshank. The rain returned in full force, and the path seemed to grow longer. A somewhat rickety boardwalk led out to the hide, which was large enough for just half a dozen to peer from the slits, from which were seen Grey Plover and Dunlin. There was no option but to walk back through the deluge. Our rooms had only small radiators, but they were fully utilised drying out complete sets of clothing that night.



Thursday dawned a much better day, and we were soon off to Dunwich Heath, a NT property. Here we gathered prior to a walk out across the heathland, noting a pair of Stonechat using perches for hunting. A Chiffchaff was calling



We were lucky to be able to watch a Chiff Chaff being ringed

and we walked through the heather, profiting from the spinoff from Minsmere, just across the valley, with Marsh Harrier, Shelduck, Greylag and Little Egret seen. We were soon gazing at the cheeky Dartford Warblers posing on the heather clumps, flitting around and chasing each other. In all we saw somewhere between 6 and 10 of these delightful residents, prompting remarks about how much easier they were to see at Dunwich rather than at Arne.



In the late morning we moved on to Hazlewood Common, an SWT Reserve. We invaded the small car park and set off down the track towards several other birders studying the birds flying from the scrub bordering the track into the ploughed fields to feed. As we progressed we became aware that the object of so much interest was perched just above our heads – a Coue's Arctic Redpoll, one of a handful displaced from the Continent to the east coast.



There's an Arctic redpoll in there somewhere!

It was accompanied by several Lesser Redpolls (the sub-species associated with Britain) and a few Common (Mealy) Redpolls. An ideal opportunity to study these species, and compare and contrast their points of identification – or it would have been if these birds had not been so restless! However most of the group had good if brief views of the three types, but even so, they remain a difficult taxa to identify with certainty.

We moved to the sea front at Aldeburgh, occupying seats and sleepers to consume our lunch in the sunshine



The view in the other direction was better!



Carole Kynaston

A brief sea search produced quite a large flock of Common Scoter drifting south, and at least two Great Northern Divers, one in flight to the south, and one diving for its own midday meal. RSPB's North Warren reserve is just on the northern outskirts of Aldeburgh, and we headed there for our next stop.

Many of the wildfowl species had been seen previously, Shelduck, Shoveler, Pintail, Wigeon and Teal. Skylarks sang, and among the small number of Little Egrets we picked out a Great White Egret, stalking the shallows. A Red Kite rose along the western edge of the reserve, to add to several Marsh Harrier sightings. Five times Cetti's Warbler's explosive song rang out, but as usual they skulked in the reed beds, with Greenfinch's song easier to source behind the hide. Among the many gulls present we made out a Mediterranean Gull, a tribute to our work on the first day, comparing them with Black-headed Gulls.

We left the hotel bright and early on Friday and picked up various sightings along the way – Green

Woodpecker at Hemingstone, and Red Kites at Exning and towards Peterborough. The cars arrived within ten minutes of each other at Rutland Water, and we were soon setting out for Lagoon 4, where we were most likely to add species to our list. Chiffchaffs and a Song Thrush accompanied our walk, and from the Sandpiper Hide we saw Sand and House Martins. Thanks to information from another local we were able to pick out an Egyptian Goose on the far side of the lagoon. The Osprey hide gave up a Goldeneye. Back at the visitor centre, the feeders provided Bullfinch, Greenfinch and a single Lesser Redpoll. And so we came to the end of our expedition to Suffolk. Two intrepid souls pushed on to the Lyndon centre, and caught up with the Ospreys and Tree Sparrows, bringing our total for the week to 94.



Thanks to Derrick Bradley for the photos!

Richard Howells