

Norfolk May 2010

This summer we had hoped to take a trip to the highlands of Scotland to see all the amazing birds that live in the mountains up there. Unfortunately, the trip never materialised so it looked like our birding holiday was not going to happen :(At the last hour(ish) we managed to cobble together another trip, back to where we loved in September... Norfolk. Unlike our last trip, this time we were going to be there for all the smart local breeding birds and be at prime time for rare migrants (if the winds had any east in them!). As we were going to be in England we decided to take the opportunity to try again to see our bogey bird the Ring Ouzel (see the NW blast article). A friend located a good site for us and we decided to hit that first thing on the first morning. With 5 days to go all plans went up in the air as a mega rare Oriental Pratincole appeared just north of Norfolk. I waited to see if it would leave (I'm too lazy to redo things) but it stayed put so on the last night before leaving I had to re-plan all the first day tactics (which originally included trying to see the long staying rare Bluethroat at Welney) to incorporate this superb bird. I've always loved Pratincoles but never ever thought I would get the chance to see one. Would it stay till Saturday was the question? Like last time in Norfolk we had to make the choice of which bird text alert to use and in the end we decided on Birdguides system. I also got a virgin pay as you go sim and paid the 5 quid for 3g access. If that worked in Norfolk we would be able to access the mobile internet at broadband speeds. Very useful!

The trip started on the Ben evening sailing. For the first 2 hours we seawatched from the deck hoping for a Petrel or Skua but it didn't produce anything of note just the standard seabirds. **Guillemot, Razorbill, Gannet, Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, Shag, Kittiwake, Lesser + Great black backed Gull and Herring Gull.**



Sunset over the Isle of Man from the Ben.

First stop was a car park in Yorkshire. Despite major worries that the stop off point was a dogging hotspot!! (google maps really needs a 'dodgy area' highlight filter I think). The stop went without hitch (phew).

Saturday 15th May 2010

We woke at 4.15 am and it was light enough to bird and the dawn chorus was already in full swing. Here we heard **Blackbird, Robin, Wren & Chaffinch** and also a **Tawny Owl** in the distance. We then spotted a group of young **Red Deer** running about in a nearby field. Smart. We moved up the road to the location for Ring Ouzel seeing many **Stock Dove** on the way. Near the entrance was a dark thrush on the wires but we couldn't get any view other than a silhouette, it was impossible to tell what it was. I prayed this wouldn't come back to haunt us. On the path there was no sign by the gate so we walked the 1 mile to the reservoir. The path overlooked stonewalled fields to our left and heath land to the right.



Widdop at 4am

On the heath land there were **Lapwing**, **Meadow Pipit** and **Curlew** but we scoured every field and wall with no sign of our target. As we reached the reservoir the biting cold northerly wind hit us. It felt like about -3 so we quickly checked the area picking up **Common Sandpiper**, **Canada Goose** and **Grey Heron**. The wind was too cold though and we were freezing (not dressed for -3 in May!) so, depressed, we had to turn back. As we got closer to the car park I started waffling rubbish about how the stream looked great for Dipper, next second we heard an unfamiliar squeak. We both turned to the noise just as a **Dipper whizzed past.....** Brilliant! That was surely our only chance of a Dipper on the trip and we'd seen one :). Also on the stream was a pair of **Grey Wagtail** and a **Pied Wagtail**. Smart as a Dipper is it hadn't lifted our mood enough though so we trudged, cold and dejected to within 100yds of the exit. We were hardly even scanning at this point but as I looked toward the gate, out of nowhere, appeared a dark bird on the path. I put my bins up and without even registering what I was looking at I called it....but then instantly got control of myself and changed my mind to Blackbird... but then instantly the features clicked in my head, and this time called "Ring Ouzel definitely!" In my stunned shock I struggled to point Wendy to the bird, saying useless things like "there, over there" but just managed to point caveman style (although I didn't go "ug ug"). Thankfully Wendy got onto the bird and we both shouted (quietly) "YES"! There was a female **Ring Ouzel** searching for worms on the grass. I tried my best to get a distant record shot but as it was 5am and cloudy I had to try ISO 3200 & 6400 to get any shutter speed.



I luckily managed a recognisable shot but as I stalked closer the bird flew up onto the nearby exposed cliff. We followed the bird in our bins and were very pleased to see it land and feed its young. Very cool! Realising the female had to keep feeding we left instantly. What a great start to the trip, a lifer for us both!

To break the long drive to Norfolk up we had planned more stops on the way down. Next stop was a few hours south near Lincoln at Whisby Nature Park. From reading the bumf on the internet this seemed like an interesting place and it was well placed being just off the A1(M) so not a major detour. We left Yorkshire at 6.05am and headed south. On the way we picked up the standard motorway birds **Kestrel, Buzzard, Woodpigeon, Carrion Crow etc.**

Reaching Whisby at 8.30am (after accidentally turning off the motorway too early and nearly driving into Doncaster :O!!!) we were lucky that the visitor centre was already open. It was very snazzy and the people seemed nice although we weren't given any reserve map. Nevertheless we wandered off with my own pre-printed plan to hand. Whisby is an ex gravel pit/industrial site and they have done an amazing job transforming the area. The Manx Government would do well to look at it to see how to transform our Gravel pits into a wildlife haven (if they can ever be bothered that is). The first lake had **Common Tern** and **Black headed Gull** breeding and a constant stream of **Swallow, House Martin, Sand Martin** and **Swift** feeding over it. On the muddy islands Wendy spotted a **Little Ringed Plover** bombing around. Lifer number 2 for Wendy and also my 2nd ever view of one.



Little Ringed Plover

Also on this pit were **Tufted Duck, Mute Swan** and **Coot**.

We then moved on to where I had read the main interests like to hang out. Before we even got there, we heard, then saw a **Garden Warbler** sitting out in the open. Unfortunately it went deep in the bushes before I could get the camera on it.....Doh.

In the ditches along the path were a few **Moorhen** then out of the blue there was a massive blast of amazing flutey song that we knew was coming from the bird we were looking for. Try as we might we couldn't see the blighter though. Our choice was to stay and try to see the bird in the dense bushes or chance further round. We chanced our arm and went for the latter. Luckily the amazing songs were blasting out from everywhere! Several times we saw birds fly into the bushes but couldn't pin any of them down when suddenly Wendy said excitedly she could see one. I asked for directions but she was too scared to drop her bins in case she lost the bird. Wendy was getting great views and describing them in detail (gripping me off more like!) I finally managed to pick out the bird but only got a dull bottom half view before it disappeared. Wendy was chuffed to bits, I on the other hand was as sick as a parrot. We moved on

(well Wendy skipped off and I dragged my feet) but as we did there was another blast of song from a very nearby less dense bush. Yet again eagle eyes found the bird and she had a clear view. I think we both need to learn better directional skills as Wendy's "in the green bush, the middle of it" was as useful as my earlier "over there" Ring ouzel directions. Desperately and for what seemed like ages I searched for the bird but couldn't see it at all. The bird was surely going to move off as it had been singing for minutes, but then finally I spotted it singing its heart out, a brilliant **Nightingale**! This was a lifer for me and Wendy. We carried on enjoying watching it nearly snap its own head off in its violent sing style when I thought ooo flip "record shot"! But by then it was too late and the bird shifted before I could even set my undergrowth settings. Nevertheless this was the bird we came to Whisby for and we had not only heard it but also managed to see it. Not an easy thing to do. Could our first day get any better? We then walked north across the Railway line where the flooded pits end and it becomes a scrubby, fieldy type area. I had read on the good Whisby NP website what birds could be seen in this area so we knew it was worth a wander. First up were a few **Reed Bunting** and **Linnet** quickly followed by Wendy finding some **Bullfinch**. We went right out as far as you could go and then on the way back spotted a couple of **Grey Partridge** in a wet field. Not what I was expecting here. Then we heard the call to grip Wendy right off...the loud laugh of a Green Woodpecker calling from deep in the trees. This was a major blocker for her, having heard them many times but never seen one. We failed to see one in September (even though I had guaranteed one... whoops) but this time I 200% guaranteed one. Imagine my relief as Wendy shouted **Green Woodpecker!!** While I had been watching the Grey Partridge thinking it would be impossible to locate the woodpecker, Wendy had been hard at work scouring all the trees in the distance and with eagle vision found the bird on the side of a tree! Impressive stuff. We worked our way round the paths to be a bit closer to try and get a better view but by then the bird had long gone. So we got a shot of the GW tree instead :)



Green Woodpecker tree at Whisby NP

This was lifer number 4 for Wendy and we hadn't even reached Norfolk yet! On the way out of the reserve we had a look round the impressive visitor centre shop and Wendy got her coffee fix (even though she had already downed a flask of Coffee by 6am!) and we left at 11.10am.

The final planned journey break was the biggy. We arrived at Frampton Marsh in Lincoln at about 12.10pm but were quite calm as I had been getting constant text alerts saying that the Pratincole was still there. Even though it had been there since the previous Sunday evening I had realised that this Saturday would be the first time employed people would be able to get to see the bird. I was expecting busy (but quietly hoping not) but was completely shocked when there were two wardens on the road acting as traffic directors! The place was jam packed, I reckon over 100 cars at least. There was no chance of any directions from the busy and tiny visitor centre so we just followed the crowds. Before even walking away from the centre Wendy spotted a cracking Male **Garganey** on the first freshwater flood. It was a bit distant though. Straight away we both really liked the look of this reserve, the freshwater floods looked superb. About 300 yards down the path were a group of birders looking through scopes so we decided to stop there and have a scan. Within seconds we spotted the **Oriental Pratincole** hawking over the marsh but it was a bit of an anti

climax as it was at about 200 yards range so the views were pretty poor. The bird was in front of the 360 hide but there was zero chance of getting in there, it was packed, as was the East hide further round. As I contemplated what to do next I heard a familiar (not sure how as we don't have them in the IOM) song and I turned round and said to Wendy **Corn Bunting!** There was a bird sitting out in the open singing its heart out. Absolutely brilliant views of yet another lifer for Wendy and my best view ever. I had absolutely no idea there were Corn Buntings here so this was a great surprise.

Looking back at the Pratincole we noticed it hawking more towards the East hide, which was about 500 yards away. We decided to go round there in case it was possible to view the bird from outside the hide. On the way we saw **Shoveler, Dunlin, Shelduck** and a massive flock of **Brent Geese**. Shouldn't these have left ages ago? The Brents on the Island left in April...weird.

Approaching the East hide we realised it would be possible to get a closer view of the Pratincole..... only problem was so had about 30 other people, the crowd outside the hide was about 3 rows deep! Dohhh. We stood at the back but still got better views than earlier. I even managed to start attempting shots as it appeared in the gaps between people.



Monster twitch at Frampton Marsh

When the Pratincole was not in view we were kept entertained by a couple of hawking **Little Gull**. Cool. The crowd was quite civilised with only a few people trying to edge to the front. But suddenly a photographer at the front turned round, saw me and amazingly offered his place up! What a nice bloke. As he moved to let me in a fat twitcher tried to barge through but I got myself in position :) Result. It was a bit of a squeeze as I had my legs positioned millimetres away from someone's tripod legs but I was now able to attempt a shot of the Pratincole. 'Attempt' being the word. With it constantly hawking it was like trying to get a shot of a big Swallow moving around at twice the speed, add on the massive heat haze and it was a too difficult for me. I was really struggling when suddenly it lifted up from over the marsh and flew right over our heads... as it did the crowd went OOOOOOOOooooo (I went with the wrong, "Aaarrrrrrr" doh) All the photographers turned their big lenses up to the sky and you could hear their spines straining and the men groaning pain..... Hahaha. Obviously, being the young whippersnapper that I am I took the strain easily..... Not! On its second pass over our heads I finally managed an 'in focus' shot and that was one of only 2 in focus out of about 200 taken.....Erkk. Thank the lord for that though, as I doubt we will ever see one of these again, they should be out India way not anywhere near England.



Oriental Pratincole

Ecstatic with these superb views we went back to the car. (Later on after talking to other birders in Norfolk we found out we had been unbelievably lucky with the views we got as most people had only had views of it on the ground at distance!) On the way back to the car we picked up **Great crested Grebe, Avocet, Gadwall, Black Tailed Godwit, Turnstone, Sedge Warbler** and **Little Egret**. We really liked Frampton Marsh, definitely a reserve to visit on future trips to Norfolk I think. We left Frampton at 2.30pm and headed for Norfolk. Weirdly, I still had energy and suggested we pop into Flitcham Abbey farm on the way to Blakeney. Maybe the Little Owl that was hiding in September would be there this time..... Wendy was a bit tired so decided she would try an energy drink that she had bought from a Manx health food shop. Obviously this was a bad idea as within seconds she said she was burning up and her skin was tight and itchy. After a minute she was in a full-blown panic saying she was going to die of anaphylactic shock as we were nowhere near a hospital!! Holy mackerel! Before I managed to program the nearest A&E into the sat nav, the symptoms disappeared and all was well again.....drama queen ;) From that experience we can only say that those drinks are not energy drinks but more like instant “panic in a bottle”. Stick with proper medicines from a real shop that’s what I say.

We arrived at Flitcham at 3.25pm. Wendy sparked up her camping stove before I had even put the handbrake on and she got another (calming?) coffee in. Not to let that get in the way though she managed to bird at the same time!



Wendy "Coffee Birding" at Flitcham

Unfortunately at the hide (which overlooks a small pool and fields) it was completely dead. We did eventually spot a new bird at Flitcham when a nice **Jay** flew across in front of us. The list of possible birds for this site needs severely revising I think. Turtle Dove was supposed to be nailed on for this place but there was no sign and no mention in the logbook.

We eventually reached base camp at 5pm after having been on the road for 24 hours exactly and picked up a **Mistle Thrush** in the gardens. In my original plan for the Saturday we were going to catch up on sleep and start afresh on the Sunday but that's what wussies would do! That wasn't for us hardcore so we had some food and got ourselves out to Salhouse Heath to try and get the main reason we came to Norfolk in May... Nightjar! We both loved Nightjars with Wendy going one-step further in saying she would cry if she saw one! (fttt Women!)

Salhouse Heath is an area of lowland heath and gorse with some conifers and deciduous trees dotted around. It's not a proper reserve or anything so it was just a matter of finding somewhere to park and then go and stand outside and see if anything flew by.



We got on site at 8pm and already there were two birders standing there. We got talking to them and they were on a two-day trip from the Midlands. They weren't very optimistic though as they said there were very few midges about. Whilst waiting we heard a few **Yellowhammer** and another Tawny Owl. Within an hour the crowd had swelled to 14 people! But the Midlands crew predilections were bang on as all we got was 1 churring Nightjar far in the distance.

What a quality start to the trip though. Wendy had seen 7 lifers already and I had seen 3 which was more than I'd seen in total during our last trip in September.....Crazy stuff!

Sunday 16th May 2010

The weather forecast had predicted that today would be the worst day of the week and they were bang on as when we arrived at our first location at 9.30am it was cold and threatening rain. If only the wind was easterly the rain would have pushed in some migrants but unfortunately the wind was northerly and flipping freezing! Our first stop was Friary hills which is a small area of high dunes right next to the salt marsh.



Looking back towards the Friary hills "hill"

The dunes are about 40 foot high in places but the best bit is the areas of bushes, gorse and also a bush lined ditch that runs parallel along the path. No wonder I have heard this place mentioned a lot on Birdguides, in the right conditions this place must be a migrant hotspot. We wandered off in the cold and instantly heard a familiar song. There were several **Lesser Whitethroat** here. We then got our first **Marsh Harrier** of the trip hunting over the marsh.

Disappointingly at the end of the path that seemed to be it, we couldn't locate any other migrants at all. Suddenly a loud flutey song came out of a nearby bush. No way.... another Nightingale! How queer. After that surprise we turned back and went up onto the top of the hills. While up here we had a very quick flash by of a small grey falcon like bird. I was sure it was a Cuckoo but as Wendy desperately wanted to see Cuckoo we scrubbed it in the hope we would get to see one properly at some point. We always kept looking up in case of a migrating raptor and this paid off as very, very high up there was a Buzzard sized bird with broad wings but it also had a distinctly long tail. It was far too high to get any details and it meant we couldn't instantly put a name to the raptor. It was like a cross between a Marsh harrier and a Buzzard I thought. It was only when the bird started to go into drop height mode that I suddenly thought, "Oooo poo get a record shot" so I did. I've showed the image to a friend but unfortunately it seems the posture this shows makes the bird look very different to how it was. (i.e. thin wings when it actually had broad wings) so it's of no use. I am still sticking with possible Honey Buzzard as my ID though :)



Unknown Raptor over Friary Hills

After the raptor cleared off inland we left the area. It was now 11.05 so we moved off to our next location. On the way we popped into Cley so Wendy could get her poncy Deli fix (and poncy it was too with a posh woman loudly saying "darling darling don't touch the falafel darling"). After Wendy came back from getting foods I've never heard of and the world's most expensive coffee she said, "what was that bird that flew by, it looked like a Woodpecker?". All I had seen was a dark blob so said "err Starling?" This got me a glare and then a nag as a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** flew out from the tree... Whoopsadaisy :)

In our notes it says we got to Kelling Quags at 12.45. I'm not sure where the time went there, I was probably enjoying my crisp sandwich lunch too much (Walkers cheese and onion I think). Anyways Kelling Quags (or water meadows as some people call it) was a place we visited in September. It is just one very shallow flooded field that cows feed in. I had massively high hopes for migrating waders here and at the very least Yellow Wagtail..... there was 2 **Egyptian Geese** there and nothing else. It was shockingly bad. We battled on determined to find something but only managed a **Reed Warbler** and a group of 4 **Gannet** passing when we reached the beach. Still undeterred by the chronic birding (something we are severely used to on the IOM) we tried to the west, down the path. According to the OS map there was another pool down here.... err yeah....a mile later and there was nothing so we turned back. At this point we had a new bird to mock us as a Cuckoo starting calling from a distant copse. Dohhhh. This perked Wendy up because along with Green Woodpecker, Cuckoo was another commonish bird she had heard but desperately wanted to see. Unfortunately I could tell there was zero chance of seeing this bird so we carried on back to the car. We left here at 1.35pm having only spent 50 minutes here. That shows how bad it was and we even made a note to never go back to Kelling Quags again!! (2 days after coming home there was a Male Red-backed Shrike and Bee-eater there!! OMGGGGgg)

On our original plan we intended to move up the road to Kelling Heath but as the text alert had said there was 2 Temminck's Stint at Cley early in the morning, we changed the plans and went the few miles west to Cley reserve. Cley is possibly my favourite bird reserve. It's not massive or anything like that but it just seems very well set up for actually being able to see whatever is there. All the islands in the shallow floods are close enough to the hides and most of the birds seem to congregate near the hides so there is always something to see or photograph. We went round to the East Bank car park and at 14.30 set off on the trek round to the North hide. Looking over the floods from the East bank we picked up **Knot**, **Little Tern**, **Sandwich Tern**, **Wigeon** (why was that still there?), **Teal**, **Common Sandpiper** and keeping up our good run with a previous major blocker... 2 **Bearded Tit** flying around the reeds. Unfortunately in the North hide there was no sign of the Temminck's Stint dohhhhh, the only thing of note was that a man decided to stand right behind us and heavy breathe in our ears..... Eeeek! A bit unnerved by that we scooted back to the car and went back to Cley reserve proper.



Cley Reserve

I had planned on us spending half a day here later in the week but as we got there at 4.45pm we had enough time left in the day for this to be our visit of Cley. The afternoon light was right behind the main 3 hides so it was perfect for photography. Looking through the floods Wendy found a solitary **Pochard** and then we were given a good hunting show from a Marsh Harrier. It was in view for so long I even managed to get some video. [Marsh Harrier at Cley video](#)

Whilst I was doing this Wendy interrupted me with "what's this coming in?" I stopped messing about and got my bins on the grey bird belting towards the marshes. In unison we said **Hobby!** It was a bit far off but in the nice light we got good views of the smart mask and red pants. Very cool and a good view of another lifer for Wendy. After taking about 300 pics (which this Black tailed Godwit was one of)



Black-tailed Godwit

and also finding a **Sanderling** running around it was way past tea time so we decided to head off. Walking down the path back to the car park I spotted another grey bird flying like the clappers towards us. Again very falcon like but even without the bins up I called "**Cuckoo!**" Wendy nearly jumped out of her skin but got onto the bird for an excellent flight view of her second lifer in 10 minutes... queue the patented "lifer dance" (jump around on the spot) and high fives all round. Great stuff. With both of us chuffed to bits we left at 6.40pm. Later in the evening back at base camp we got the batbox out and were treated to a Pipistrelle hunting over our heads. Great end to the day but it was early to bed as tomorrow was going to be a monster day.

Monday 17th May 2010

We woke at 3.30am..... I'll just let that sink in for a second... **3.30am!!!!**. Holy sausages batman. We had over an hours drive to get to our first destination in Suffolk and for the target bird we had to be there early. It was a very clear night so it was also cold and there was frost on the ground (In May! :O). We left at 4.55am and on the way down by the side of the road we saw 2 **Red-legged Partridge** then a little **Muntjac** deer and 2 Hares. Going past the Pensthorpe area (home to Springwatch) we both spotted a white bird fly across the road and land in a tree. It was a bit early in the morning so our brains were taking a while to engage but there was a lovely **Barn Owl** sitting only a few feet away completely unfazed by the traffic. Our destination was 50 miles away but my petrol gauge had been severely wounded by the drive to Norfolk and was now showing only 20 miles left Eeek!! Not to worry I thought the UK has loads of 24 hr garages.... Hmmm. The first garage we pulled into was shut and then the second garage didn't have the credit card thingys working.... Uh oh.. panic was setting in...but finally at 6am and with my gauge saying 10 miles left! We found a nice little garage open.... phew panic over and more importantly Wendy's coffee addiction was sorted too.

At 6.25am we arrived at Lakenheath reserve and what a place. In the car park there was a Great Spotted Woodpecker on a feeder and then closer to the visitor centre there were Reed Warblers absolutely everywhere. We have never heard or seen so many, it was as if the UK's entire population had come to Lakenheath for a holiday. It was brilliant but how I didn't manage to get a decent shot of any of them I'll never know. Whoops) Lakenheath reserve is like 90% reed bed with a few stands of Poplar trees.



Lakenheath

I think the Rspb are trying to increase the reeds on this reserve to help reed bed species and it looks to us like it is working. Not only the Reed warblers but we heard a Bittern booming and there were several Marsh Harriers. On reaching the second stand of Poplars we heard another Green Woodpecker and then heard the song we had come to hear. Next step was to see the bird. Even though the male is bright yellow and black we knew full well how difficult they are to spot. The whole reason for us going at a mentally early time was to increase our chances, as the birds are most active very early in the day. While we looked to try and locate it, several other birders appeared (obviously as mental as us!) For several minutes we all scanned the high treetops whilst the amazing song (that sounds like it belongs

in a rain forest) kept blaring out. Suddenly from the song location a bird flew and we got our bins on it, as it landed Wendy could see the colours of the bird too....brilliant! The killer wake up had all been worth it ... **Golden Oriole**! It flew again after about 15 mins but then it all went quiet. Happy with this we were about to move off when we spotted two cracking Hobby's roosting in the trees. They were too far away even for a record shot which was a shame as they are such great looking birds. As we walked further down to the end of the reserve a **Stoat** appeared and bounced down the track towards two other birders. Unbelievably the birders never turned round! When the Stoat got to within about 20 foot it stopped and sat there facing them as if it was going hmmm "they look a bit big but I reckon I could ave em". If only they'd turned around they would have had the best view of a Stoat ever... but they didn't and the Stoat decided they were too big to eat so darted off the path. At the end of the reserve we heard a **Cetti's Warbler** blasting its song out but yet again I couldn't get a view arghghghg.. stupid annoying bird!. Whilst trying to see that we also heard the 'dying pig' call of a **Water Rail**. On the long walk back we heard another Cuckoo, which flew in and landed high up in the trees giving us a great view. I even managed a record shot even though I was holding the camera at a near vertical (major back breaker) angle.



Cuckoo

What a great place Lakenheath is and to top it all off when we went into the (now open) visitor centre the staff were extremely friendly too. Most importantly though they had coffee making facilities so Wendy got her Coffee fix. She was in such a withdrawal (from the massive 3 hours without coffee) she slumped outside on the path to down it as quick as possible. As two birders walked past they must have assumed she was homeless and gave her some change!! They then chatted to her asking did she have a place to stay that night...! :P What nice people (but also slightly worrying). We left Lakenheath at 10.05am.

Next stop was only 5 minutes down the road but took 10 after listening to the co-pilot and going the wrong way coming out of Lakenheath. At 10.15am we parked up at Weeting Heath which is a small reserve looking out over a weird sandy grassland area. I had hoped to be able to get here earlier as I had read the late morning Heat haze could be terrible but we would just have to grin and bare it now as the temperature was already above 20 degree C.



Weeting Heath

Yet again the visitor centre staff were very helpful and gave us some good info on the recent sightings so we trotted off towards the West hide. On the way we found a few **Spotted Flycatchers**. I had hoped we would reach this place earlier in the morning to avoid the heat haze but unfortunately we hadn't managed it. The day had really heated up and the heat haze was terrible. The west hide was packed but some people shifted up a bit for us, which was nice, and we got a seat. We chatted to a few people and were told there hadn't been a sighting of the target bird all morning.... Uh oh! We settled down for the long haul. Whilst waiting I spotted a Stoat darting around and diving in Rabbit burrows. This was very cool to see and eventually it appeared with what looked like a baby rabbit. It was weird to see the adult Rabbits just sitting around practically looking the other way. Everyone in the hide including me was enjoying the spectacle when Wendy suddenly said, "I've got one". She gave me directions but in the heat haze, at about 400 yards distance and with only the head showing it looked like a Red Legged Partridge to me so I disagreed and continued looking elsewhere. Wendy disagreed with me and kept an eye on the bird. A few minutes later she said it's moving and called it out loud in the hide, "**STONE CURLEW**". Very brave from Wendy, if she was wrong we would be hounded out of the hide as idiots and banished from Suffolk for life but as she gave directions to everyone, one by one, they all got onto the bird and were delighted! Several people had scopes and a nice man offered his up to Wendy to have a good view. Amazingly after everyone was happy, one strange woman was exclaiming loudly, "No no I don't believe there's even a bird there". One very patient chap let her use his scope and put it right on the birds face but she still wasn't convinced..... deary me. I slapped on both tele-converters but it was too difficult (in the worst heat-haze I've ever seen). This shot is the only one in about 50 where you can just about make out that there is a Stone Curlew there and that's at a push!



It is a Stone Curlew honest

Most people had left the hide by now but one man came over to Wendy and personally thanked her for finding the bird! Awww.....how nice. Thank god Wendy thinks I'm an idiot and always wrong or we would definitely have missed out :). After all that excitement a chap then casually mentioned a Green Woodpecker which was feeding on the ground very close to the hide! This was the best view both of us have ever had of a GWP. I could have watched it all day.



Green Woodpecker

As we got up to leave the hide a **Wheatear** flew in then flew straight back out again. Instead of leaving we decided to check out the new hide to see what the view was like from there. We were a bit shocked when we arrived and found it didn't look over the grassland but over a clearing in some small trees. Ehh? I went to walk out of the door when Wendy said, "Eh up **Marsh Tit**". Sure enough there was a Marsh Tit, the hide was actually looking over a hidden feeding station. I sat back down to watch it and as I did the heavens opened. There hadn't been a cloud in the sky so for it to be hailing now was crazy. Handy place to be though, we were nice and dry in the hide :) After the hail shower had finished we popped back into the West hide for one last look at the GWP. Some people who were still in there recognised Wendy as the "Stone Curlew Celeb" and told her that the bird was back and giving much better views. The views were slightly better in that it was now walking around on the ridge but it was still 400 yards off. There was no heat haze this time (due to the downpour) so I got my tcs back on but by the time I had the bird had scarpered off ... bum. After another coffee fix from the visitor centre (for Wendy) we left Weeting at 12.35pm.

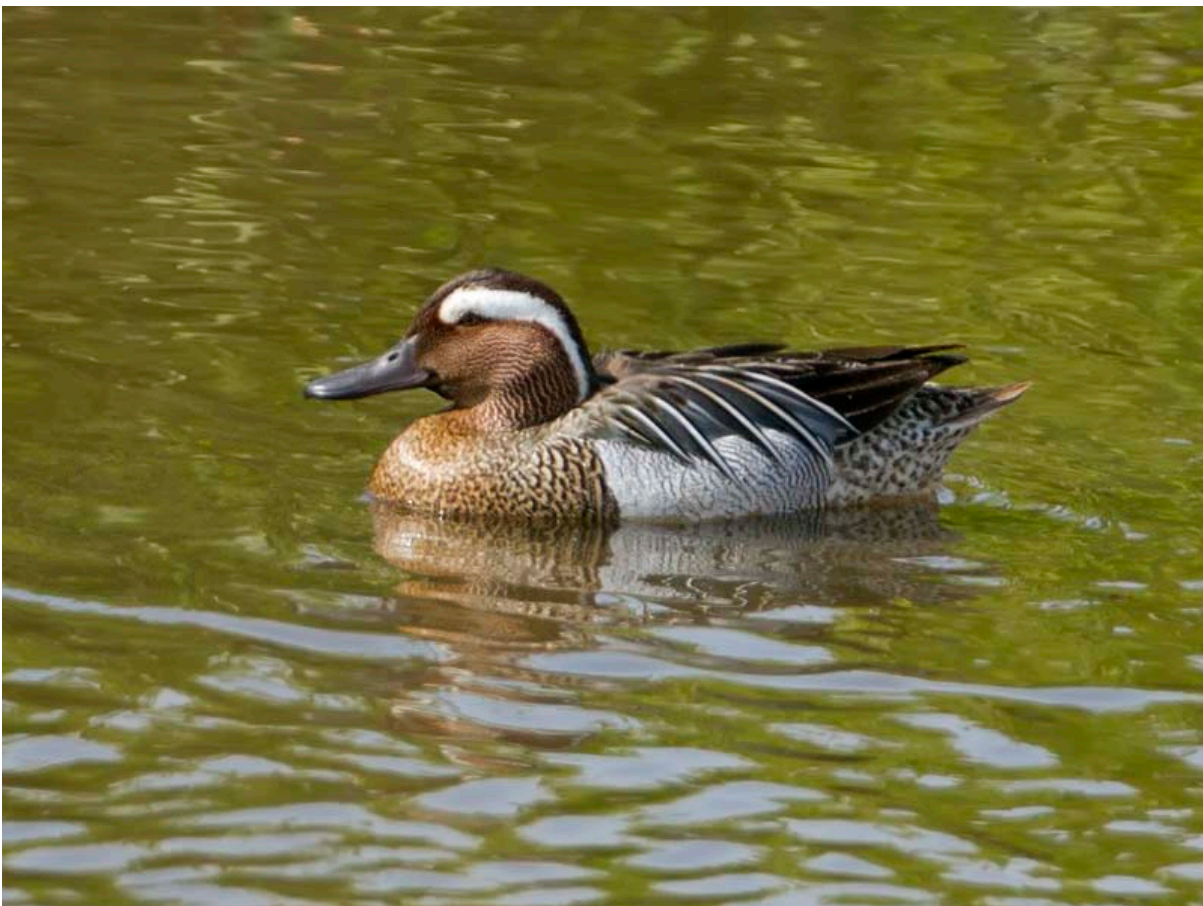
On the original plan the next location was Santon Downham which was a big woodland area which would have given us a chance to see all the woodland specialities. This was on the way back north but as the text alerts had been telling us every day (including that morning) that the Bluethroat at Welney was still showing well we decided to totally change the plan and go the 20 ish miles west to try our luck.

At 1.15pm we arrived at Welney. This is a WWT reserve that seems to be flooded areas next to the Little Ouse or Great Ouse or some sort of Ouse and associated reedbeds.



Welney and the Bluethroat Reeds

It has a ridiculously flash visitor centre. I think the entrance fee is what's paying for the centre as it is a shocking £6.70 each. But for a Bluethroat AND of the rarer white spot race we would pay a tenner each..... easy. Before we even got through the doors of the visitor centre we spotted several Corn Bunting in the car park and Wendy found two distant **Yellow Wagtail** in the nearby field. Both were bright males so nice ones to see for her first. In the visitor centre the bloke on the desk was again very friendly and extremely helpful with details on where the Bluethroat was so armed with his info and a reserve map we trotted off. We checked all the hides heading to the right but didn't see anything new for the trip. Eventually we reached the Bluethroat hide and there were a few bored looking people in there.... uh oh. We settled down for the long wait. While scanning the area a pair of Garganey appeared in the channel in front of us which enabled me to get a better shot than I had got earlier in the trip.



Garganey

After a few hours of staring endlessly at lifeless reeds we got chatting to the birders next to us. They told us that they had briefly seen it about 20 minutes before we'd arrived.....ARggghghhhh!! It felt like we had just been punched in the

stomach. They left but we managed to summon up a last bit of enthusiasm to try for another hour, by now though we were in agony. I had abandoned the bench hours earlier and was standing on my tiptoes trying to see out of the hide window. Wendy was having to squat on the bench to be able to see!!



Wendy in the “quality” hides

The windows were at the totally wrong height and the benches were too high as well. Whoever designed the hides needs a slap. It looked like it had been designed by ‘giant & midget & sons’ or something. Welney was easily the most expensive reserve to visit on our trip and also strangely had the worst hides... mental. Maybe I was just getting narky as our efforts to see the Bluethroat had by now ended in a dip and to top it all off I had raging back pain and Wendy had bum bone pain (ooooer). I think we were on a impossible mission trying to see the Bluethroat on this trip though, Welney was totally out of the way and to get here for a morning (seemingly the best time to see it) would have meant throwing an entire days plan in the bin. That wasn’t possible now so we knew that our only chance had gone. On the way out (picking up a coffee on the way) there was a half eaten Red-legged Partridge that looked like a Sparrowhawk had just munched it and we went back to the Corn Buntings so I could try for a shot.



Corn Bunting

Also in the bush were a few **Tree Sparrow** hopping about with the Corn Buntings. When we got back to the car we heard a pitiful voice saying "helppp". We looked across and there was a woman in her sixties sitting on the grass... I was well confused but Wendy went over and the woman asked to be helped up. I was still wondering what was going on when I noticed Wendy struggling to lift the large lady up... being the Gentleman I am, I stood on the spot. I was thinking about saying, "Bend with your knees Wendy", that would have been helpful...probably. Eventually Wendy pulled the lady up and she was very thankful. Wendy wasn't best pleased with me though :). We left Welney at 4.45pm.

On the long journey back to base camp we decided to have a quick stop at a raptor watch point. We parked up at 6pm and joined the 8 people already there. There was a RSPB lady there who didn't say a word to anyone and after about 10 minutes she left.... useful... not. Seems like an easy job, stand like a statue at a car park all day.....kerchingtastic. Luckily the people there were talkative and told us that the birds hadn't been seen since the morning... oh poo! Just as they said that a lovely Barn Owl floated right past us, no more than 50 ft away, nice! In the distance there were a few Common Buzzard, which got our pulses racing for a second, and in the field next to us was a single Grey Partridge. By 7pm everyone had left so we took the hint and departed empty handed.

Tuesday 18th May 2010

Luckily we managed to recover from the world's longest day and since it was sunny and warm we felt optimistic that the first port of call would this time produce the result we wanted. We arrived back at the same watch point as last night at 9.25am. There were only 4 people here this time and when we spoke to them they said there had been no sign so far. This time round a strange, dark, Marsh Harrier with a white patch on its rump got us excited for a few seconds but again it wasn't what we were hoping for. By 10am with nothing else to show apart from hearing another Cuckoo we left.

At 10.20am we arrived at Burnham Overy, which is a tiny village right on the edge of the coastal marsh. I had looked at the car park on google streetview and found out that it floods at high tide! "Not to worry", I thought, "I'll just check when high tide is... oh poo... 10.30am!" I decided that the best plan was to sit around in the car park area until the tide turned at 10.31am. Luckily enough the high tide was a low one so we were able to go for the walk along the reed lined ridge towards the dunes without the car floating away. As soon as we got up on the ridge we noticed a very smart looking reed lined ditch running parallel with the ridge. Straight off we heard a Cetti's Warbler blasting out its song. There were also Reed Warblers everywhere again. If only we could have nicked a few and Parcel Forced them back to

the IOM. A bit further along and we heard the distinctive “ping ping ping” of a Bearded Tit. We quickly located the bird, which then became birds. In the end we got superb views down to about 20 ft of three Bearded Tits! I couldn’t get a clear photo through the reeds though which was a shame.



Burnham Overy

We then got a Text alert saying 2 Common Cranes flew west over Kelling Quags. That made me raise an eyebrow as Kelling Quags was east of where we were. I assumed they would be heading for Holkham and about 20 minutes later we got another text saying 2 Cranes flew west over Holkham...! This now got my spidey senses tingling. Next stop if they continued was where we were!!! We were now scanning the sky constantly as we walked but saw nothing.... Bum... they must have dropped on the Holkham marsh somewhere out of sight. About 10 minutes later as we got to the dunes we got talking to a birder. He was a very nice chap but the first thing he said was “I’m assuming you just saw the two Cranes fly past?” Our jaws hit the floor and the best we could do was come out with a near tearful “wha...t?” He said, “yeah they just flew west over the sea”. We couldn’t believe it as we had been scanning the sky all the time. Only at one point for nanoseconds did Wendy try and macro a Butterfly. There’s no way that they went past while we were doing that... no way. One bird we really wanted to see on the trip was Common Crane so to miss these was especially frustrating. After slapping myself to get it together we continued chatting to the bloke. We spoke to him about Nightjars like we had with several people before. All had worryingly said the same thing, “We haven’t seen any this year despite trying” but this chap told us to not bother with Salthouse again and to go to Sandringham. He even drew us a quality map of where to go....what a nice bloke. That generosity picked us up and we got a new burst of enthusiasm to walk out to Gun Hill in the dunes. I had heard the mention of ‘Gun Hill’ many times on Birdguides when rarities had turned up so was pleased to be able to put a face to the name so to speak. The place looked superb and in one area there were sheltered, low-lying bushes literally yards from the North Sea. Unfortunately, there had been no decent winds for weeks and this showed..... big time. The only migrant we found in the dunes was a Wheatear. Very disappointing. I had dreamt of finding a Wryneck or Shrike here but we left Gun hill empty handed. Missing the Cranes was an added kick in the Gentlemen’s area :(There were a few Butterflies flying about here too so we both tried our best to Macro them but that didn’t work either.... Dohh!



Wendy macro'ing on Gun Hill

On the way back we heard Cuckoos calling (again) and were amazed to see 2 birds flying over us calling! Smart.....but the best was yet to come. Probably half way back, whilst we were both scanning everywhere, I spotted a movement in the ditch out the corner of my eye. I turned, got my bins on it and near enough screamed, "**WATER VOLE!**" at Wendy. She managed to get her bins up in time and saw the little blighter paddling like a physco across the ditch and into the nearside reeds.... absolutely brilliant. Neither of us had seen a Water Vole before. By now the tide had dropped quite a way and nearly back at the car we spotted a lovely looking summer plumage **Grey Plover**. Whilst looking at that we then heard a really freaky noise from the Reeds. We both knew the noise but couldn't quite put our finger on it. Luckily the culprit showed itself, a very smart looking **Little Grebe** with 3 chicks. Overall the walk to Gun hill and back hadn't resulted in the migrants that I had hoped for but what we did see more than made up for it. We left at 1.15pm and headed east along the coast road.

We stopped for some lunch at some weird dwarf train station and then continued on to Stiffkey Fen. We came here last year and we could see that this area had potential for visiting Black terns and stuff so with fingers crossed we headed down the overgrown path at 2.05pm. As we got to the Fen the previous visit came back into my head and I remembered that this place was near impossible to view. We really couldn't understand how anyone sees anything here and our notes say one word..... "Crap!" We got annoyed very quickly here so stomped back in disgust. Here's another place we won't be visiting again unless there's something mind blowing Grrrrrr. We left at 2.35pm.

The original plan for Tuesday had been to continue east and visit another migrant site from last year, Warham Greens but with the lack of decent winds and the lack of birds at the previous migrant sites we decided to chuck Warham Greens in the bin. I scanned the text alerts to see if anything was about nearby and after a quick discussion we decided to try for the Temminck's Stint at Cley again even though there had only been one text early that morning saying the bird was there. At 2.52pm we arrived at the Coastal car park to walk the much shorter distance to the North hide. After only a few yards we came across 2 Avocet feeding in a small pool that had formed in a ditch on the shingle. The path went within 30 feet of the birds but they continued to feed..... weird. By now the temperature was ramping right up and I was starting to melt. Wendy still had her coat on, whereas I was down to a white vest and a knotted hanky on my head! (well T shirt and shorts). There were 3 people in the hide and one of the blokes had a scope. We made the mistake of thinking he would be knowledgeable so it threw us a little when Wendy quickly said ermm got an interesting small wader on the near island. Sure enough there it was **Temminck's Stint!** Brilliant stuff. We then made the second mistake of assuming the people in the hide had already seen the bird so we didn't call it out loud. We continued to watch the bird feed for around another 5 minutes when one of the blokes in the hide started talking to the 'scope dude' about the unusual small wader on the near island.....0 The scope dude then said he thought it was a Sanderling..... \ I thought I'd better say something but 'scope dude' kept talking so I couldn't get a word in. By the time he finished talking I thought that if I said something now they would wonder why I hadn't said something 5 minutes earlier to save them from their misidentification.... Errkkk..... dilemma. In the end I decided to just be quiet and hope that maybe

they would come to the right conclusion in the end. I then slapped on the 2x teleconverter and started attempting a long distant record shot. 10 minutes later when I had just about got a recognisable shot, the scope dude and his pal had finally decided on Temmincks Stint..... phew..... I would have felt pretty guilty if they'd continued with Sanderling!



Temminck's Stint

Temminck's Stint was one migrant we had really hoped to see on this trip so we were very pleased to see one on our last possible attempt. Happy with that we left the hide but on the way back to the car the Avocets were still on the pool so I managed to get close, in a low position, without disturbing them and got some half decent shots.

We left the West bank (not the controversial one) at 3.50pm and went home for some tea. As it was absolutely boiling we thought the evening might be good for Nightjars but this time we would follow the directions the nice bloke had given us. Heat means midges and moths so that means Nightjar food surely! After tea we had a lot of time spare before we had any chance of Nightjar so we popped into the raptor watch point (as it was on the way) for one last go. We arrived at the site at 6.30pm, which was supposed to be the best time but there was hardly anyone else there. Not a good sign but as we parked up we noticed the 4 people all looking in the same direction which made me think, "Eh up, that could mean something". We got out of the car and quickly got into position. Nobody said anything though so we presumed that we have been too optimistic but Wendy decided to ask if there had been any sightings just in case. Imagine our panic when a lady told us that the male was just behind the hedge! What..? Sure enough there it was slowly gliding over the distant hedge, a male **Montagu's Harrier**. We had certainly put in the effort to see one and to get a male too was just brilliant. I decided to run and get my camera just in case it flew closer to get a record shot but it disappeared behind the trees... poo! A few minutes later though it reappeared and this time on a direct course towards us! At this point in the trip I had thought my 7d had been back focusing so that added to the stress levels in my head as the bird carried on in our direction. I then made the brave (stupid) decision to go for manual focus if the bird came in range. Within seconds the bird did come into range and me and a bloke next to me opened up... DUGGA DUGGA DUGGA DUGGA... Normally I think about shouting "woahhh semper fi, get some, get some" ala any yanky modern war film but this time I was concentrating so hard I forgot about mucking about. After what seemed like minutes but was more like 20 seconds the bird banked and flew down the field and away. What views! Everyone was totally hyper but I went into chimp mode. "Pleaaseeee don't have messed up" was all that was running through my mind. To my complete amazement and obviously by pure luck I had about a 90% keeper rate! phewww.



Montagu's Harrier

With both of us over the moon we left at 6.55pm to continue. The sat nav was telling us we would be on the Nightjar site by 7.15pm which was still way too early and since there seemed very little else to see at Sandringham, we stopped and had another read of the Neil Glenn book and found a site near Sandringham called Dersingham bog. The book said there were Woodlark, Tree Pipit, Woodpeckers and Woodcock here as well as being the best site in Norfolk for Nightjars! I scratched my head and couldn't understand why I had Salthouse Heath down as the best place. Maybe the book was out of date? Because of the other species we could see we made the extremely late decision to go to Dersingham instead of Sandringham but would this come back to haunt us? :-\

We parked up in the empty car park at 7.30 pm. Hopefully the lack of people here was down to us being early rather than the site being pants. As I had no maps of this place I had a quick glance at the book and worked out that there was a nice loop walk to go on. Hopefully this wouldn't be too long and we would get back to the pinpointed spot to view for Nightjars in time. Dersingham bog is a really strange area and we have nothing like it on the island. On reading the bumf it said the inland cliff was actually an ancient sea cliff, which looked like a sand cliff of about 50 foot. On those raised areas was a sparse conifer plantation but below the cliff was this massive lowland boggy heath. It really did look prehistoric (not that I have ever seen any prehistoric landscape personally of course).



Looking out over Dersingham Bog

Worryingly there were very few midges about but as we walked we picked up a **Stonechat** and a **Grasshopper Warbler** singing. A bit further round we spotted a Pipit on top of a conifer. I was adamant it was a Tree Pipit but in the fading light Wendy was not convinced. The bird then flew and landed closer to the path and it sang. I quickly double-checked the song of a Tree Pipit on my Iphone bird guide (as it's been a long time since I heard the song) and that totally confirmed it. **Tree Pipit**, another new bird for Wendy. Excellent, now we just had to find a flipping Woodlark. About 2 miles later and with the loop completed there had been no sign of Woodlark. I found out later Woodlark is severely depleting in Norfolk... doh! Never mind, we still had the main speciality to come. As we tried to work out the best place to view from we spotted a birder walking towards us who finally stopped quite close by so we thought, "Aha this place will do nicely". We got chatting to him and he was another thoroughly nice bloke. He had just arrived from a drive down from Lancashire and told us that this was THE spot for Nightjar in Norfolk and he never bothers with anywhere else. That boosted our moral big time. As the sun went down we instantly heard the weird noise of a **Woodcock**. Within minutes we had seen several flying around. We then heard the bark (scream) of a **Fox** in the distance. All very good but not what we were nearly wetting our pants for (quite literally, Wendy had had about 15 coffees today!) We then heard a distant churring, followed by a closer one and then a mentally close one (possibly 80-100 yards away). It was so loud and all 3 of us scanned like loonatics but try as we might it seemed this bird was not going to fly. We couldn't believe it. To be this close to a Nightjar and not see it was gutting. After a while all the Nightjars (possibly 4 in total) stopped churring and since it was now really cold (the clear sky had made it go from boiling to freezing very quickly) and pitch black, we decided to give in at 10pm. As we drove the 1 hour back to base camp we came to the conclusion it was surely the temperature that had stopped us seeing a bird. There was obviously a good few birds there we just needed a warmer evening and then maybe we had a chance. When we got back we did midgie bite checks and were very surprised to see no bites at all. Everything I had read had said that if you could handle the horrific swarms of midgies then Nightjar viewing would be amazing. Weird.....there were hardly any.

Wednesday 19th May 2010

Today's plan was originally to go quite a way east and end up at the broads, namely Hickling Broad to be precise. We were also planning to go to the dunes at Weybourne to pick up the smart male Woodchat shrike that had been there but as the bird had left on the 15th I started to have doubts in my mind. I had investigated going out to RSPB Minsmere, which was about a 2 hour drive away. That was a monster way to travel and with nothing being reported there (or from Hickling) we were struggling to decide what to do. The previous night, while chatting to the nice bloke, we asked him what he would do and he said that without a doubt he would go to go to Minsmere. Just as we were debating I spookily got a bird guides text saying 2 Spoonbill still at Minsmere but very elusive. Spoonbill was a bird Wendy had loved since

childhood so with that, the slight chance of Bittern and the bloke saying go for it we chucked the entire Wednesday plan into the bin and I had to quickly get a sat nav route in for East Suffolk. We left at 9am which was a bit late due to my sat nav giving me a route through the middle of Norwich.....NOOOOOOOO WAY!!! It took me 30 minutes to get a manual route in which delayed us..... dohhh. After an eventful journey down (very nearly driving up the wrong lane of an A road), we were about 30 minutes away when my text alert went off. This said, "Dotterel still at Kessingland, Suffolk". I had seen this bird mentioned before we even came away but as we never planned being anywhere near it I had ignored it. Now though I thought, "Hmmm we might actually be close to that bird." We pulled in, got the roadmap out and luckily Kessingland was on our way to Minsmere and the sat nav said it would only be a 10 minute detour. Waheyyyyy. Next issue was to work out exactly where the bird was. The text was cryptic saying south of the caravan park in the dunes. I looked at the OS map on my phone and could see a Caravan park icon north of the town....."Excellent!" (we thought.) Unfortunately we quickly realised that this was wrong as we entered a barriered private caravan site.... Eeeeeek! Wendy was being all cool and saying, "It will be fine" but in my head I was planning a GTA style barrier smash to escape! In the end I just did a 3 point turn and drove the wrong way out the one way system, "Yeahhhh eat that Caravan Nazis!" Of course we now had the problem of not knowing where we needed to go but with a stroke of luck another text came in with a grid ref.... pheww! With my army cadet map reading skills I quickly located the site, a caravan park south of the town, which I hadn't spotted before..... Dohhh! After getting through the (to be honest) very weird town, we managed to find a park and started walking in the general direction. With another stroke of luck 2 other birders appeared behind us and we asked them if they knew where the bird was... they did! That was handy because we would have struggled to find it ourselves. As we got to a long grass area behind the dunes we could see a bloke with a scope stalking what was obviously the Dotterel. I'm not sure why he needed to get within 30 yards with a scope but at least he was crouched down. The 4 of us sat down within about 30 yards of him so as to not disturb the bird. The bird then popped its head up and walked out from a tuft giving an OK view of Wendy's first **Dotterel**. A serious looking bloke then appeared and walked straight past us and knelt by the 'scope bloke'. I thought that was a bit off and sure enough the Dotterel started walking away. When the chap next to us whispered directions to his wife 'serious bloke' turned round, tutted loudly and shook his head like it was his fault for daring to whisper....unbelievable. This wound me up something rotten and I was sooo close to giving 'serious bloke' a piece of my mind but luckily enough I thought better of it. (He was probably carrying a knife or something this is England after all :P)



Dotterel Twitch

Unfortunately due to the other people around we couldn't try to stalk the bird to get a photo and with the time at 11.40 a.m. already we had to make a move. It was a bit of a shame to not spend more time with such a quality bird. On the final section of road down to Minsmere we came across an unbelievable road side sign. A massive hand painted sign saying "SAY NO TO SEA EAGLES"..... like what on earth...why are they saying no? A few points here.. 1) we had seen one flock of sheep in the entire time in Norfolk and Suffolk and 2) It's been proven by Norwegian Sheep farmers where there are thousands of Sea eagles that the birds don't take alive lambs, only still born and the afterbirth so this sign read to me "WE ARE COMPLETE MORONS DOWN HERE, NOONE IS WELCOME, GEROOOFF MOY LAAAAND". With the plank

earlier and now this, this area was giving me a major feeling of not being welcome, the complete opposite of how we felt in North Norfolk.

We finally got to RSPB Minsmere at 12.23 pm. The place was absolutely packed to the rafters. A quick look at the reserve map and we realised why people recommend coming here, the place had about every type of habitat going, Woodland, Lowland heath, Freshwater scrape, Reed bed, you name it, it is here.



Freshwater scrape at Minsmere

I was worried we wouldn't manage to fit it all into the 5 hours we had left. A look at the recent report board was disappointing with it saying that the Spoonbill were very elusive..... oh poo! One thing immediately impressed me though which was that you could do a circuit to fit in every hide and every bit of path. I hate reserves where you have to walk back on yourself to be able to get to another path... I much prefer circuits... maybe I have ocd... :-|. The other impressive bit was that on the reserve map it gave distances on each section of path....very handy. A quick mental calculation of the distances and I was pretty sure we could get the whole reserve done in the time we had. We set off into the woodland section and got **Treecreeper** straight off. We then came across the Bittern Hide so climbed into it and sat down. This view gave a cracking view over the monster reed bed and there were a few Marsh Harriers flying about. 2 minutes after sitting down I saw a large brown bird flying from right to left. A quick check in the bins confirmed this as a **Bittern**! Wendy got onto it and was chuffed to bits with her first ever Bittern. I was starting to think it was about time to drop the 'Team Jinx' moniker. We were getting luck by the bucket load. After that we carried on as there was not much else to see from that hide. After a few hundred yards an old bloke stopped us and started chatting to us. He was nice enough but then he said, "Ooo there's a Blue tit nesting just back here" and then proceeded to walk us back by about 200 yards!! "Refereeee, time is money!" I thought to myself. As we re-walked the bit of path we had just been on Wendy found a Marsh Tit and we got really good views of it. For the next 1km of the Woodland circuit we saw absolutely nothing of note. We then went in possibly the world's most pointless hide. First off we had to climb about a mile high to get up to it (kicking my vertigo off big time) then the reward for that was absolutely nothing. We decided to take a break and enjoy the peace, away from the crowds, for a few minutes :) The circuit then brought us back past the visitor centre where, on the centre's feeding station, was a new bird for the trip.... **Nuthatch**! A bit strange to have only seen one during the whole trip but it would have to do. As it was well past lunch time and relatively quiet in the café, we nipped in for some food. After being used to fantastic customer service up in Norfolk I was a bit taken aback by a café lady with major attitude issues. Considering this is the RSPB's flagship reserve I would have thought the staff would be the cream of the crop, maybe she was having a bad day or something? Saying that though the chocolate cake was well nice.. om nom nom :). After lunch we walked past the Sand Martin nest site that the RSPB have created. It seemed to be doing very well but we heard a week later a Stoat had been in and out of the nests taking the majority of chicks as well as some of the adults! Bit of a shame but natural selection and all that. As we walked out towards the beach section we walked past a scrubby field area where we spotted another Stoat bombing around. Before coming on this trip I had only seen a Stoat once and that was only for about 10 seconds. Now I had

seen 3 and had prolonged views every time..... brilliant. Thank god I never saw an American Mink though as I would have found the nearest rock and tried to smash its brains in, grrrrr evil animals! Out on the freshwater scrapes were the usual Common Tern, Great crested Grebe, tons of Reed warblers and a few more Bearded Tit. On a raised section of the path we heard a Cetti's warbler singing quite close but as I have pretty much given up with these annoying birds, I had resigned myself to the fact that I would never see one. Ironically this bird decided to fly out of the bush next to us, along the path and down into another bush giving me enough time to get my bins on it! Ha ha a lifer for me! :) Round at the beach end hides we were looking back into the sun but the second we got in the hide Wendy quickly spotted the bird she wanted..... **Spoonbill!** Not just one but two. They were quite far off and in a bit of heat haze but still a good enough view to see the spoons and the orangey crest on one of the birds. More fantastic luck for us. I managed a distant record shot of these smart birds, I reckon soon these will be breeding in England (if these two aren't breeding already that is) but for now they are a rare sight especially for us Manxies.



Spoonbills

After that excitement we wandered around to the other two hides that looked back over the other scrapes to see if we could get a better view of them. There was lots of activity (mainly Black-Headed Gulls) but the Spoonbills were hidden from view. Not that it mattered though as we were entertained by Common Terns diving in and we found a total of 3 Little Gull dotted about.



Little Gull

Also in this area were **Common Gull**, **Dunlin** and a nice **Common Sandpiper**. We had noticed a major lack of waders at Minsmere though which was a bit strange as we thought this place would be like a magnet for migrating Waders. We then completed the reserve circuit but as it was still early we decided to go back to the Bittern Hide for another look. We struck it lucky again and within minutes another Bittern flew and for a bit longer this time. A very well named hide! I then got to work trying to get a decent Marsh Harrier photo. Every time I've been down to Norfolk I've tried and failed but this time I did a lot better. Still not great but at least they were better than my previous attempts.

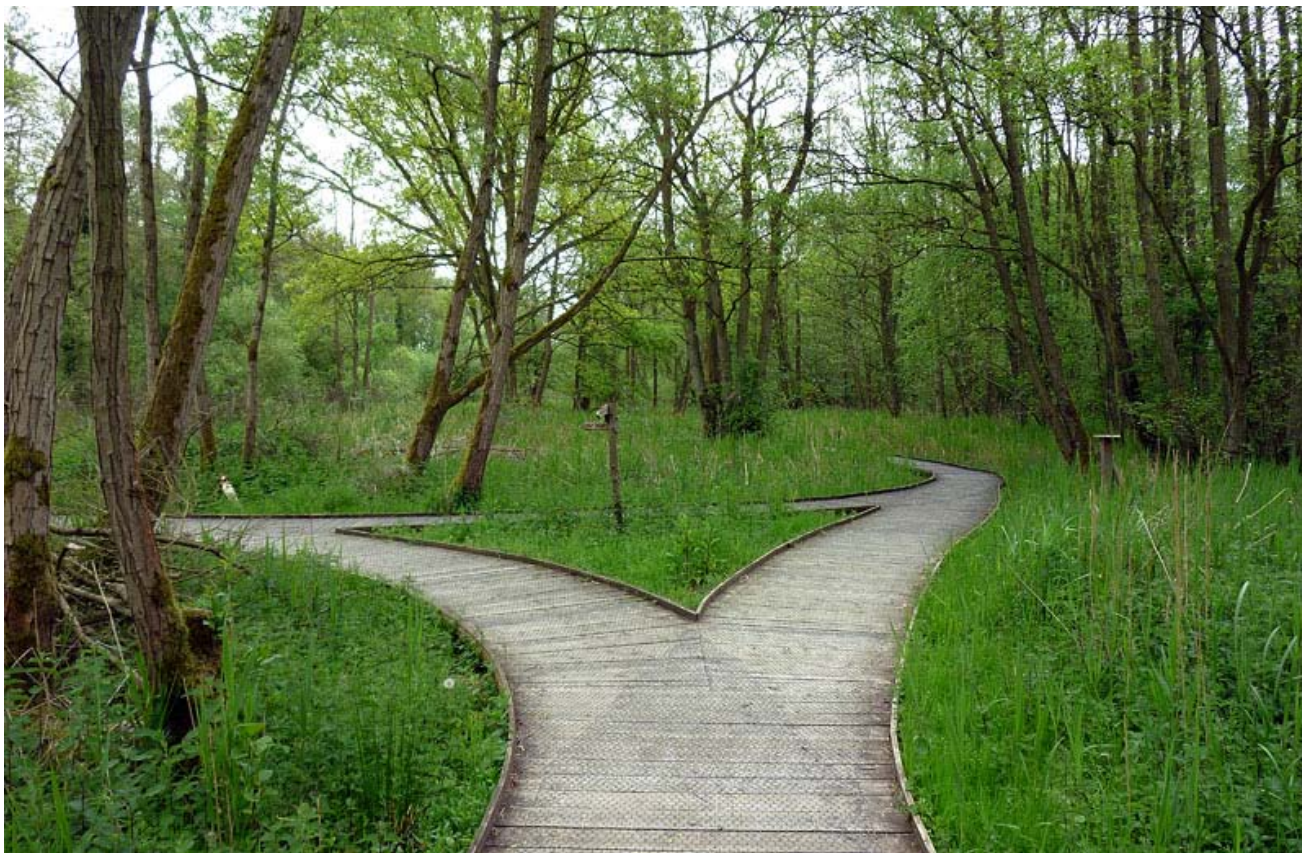


Marsh Harrier

By now we were starting to flag and I was struggling to lift the big lens so we called it a day and left Minsmere at 6.16pm. It was a bit of a trek to go to Minsmere but it was worth it to see the reserve that everyone talks about and with Wendy getting 3 lifers and me 1 I reckon it was a good decision to ditch our original plan.

Thursday 20th May 2010

As Thursday was our last full day in Norfolk we decided to go to the sites that we had ditched off during the week. The decision was helped by the fact that there was zero new birds coming in on the textsshame. We were at the first site by 8.40am but unfortunately the Sculthorpe Moor centre wasn't open till 9am Oops! Luckily within a few minutes a nice reserve bloke arrived and let us in early. Sculthorpe Moor used to be a shooting ground but it has been leased to the Owl Trust who have turned it into a small Woodland and Reed bed reserve. It's supposed to be good for Dragonflies and Otters and stuff, which sounded good to me, it certainly looked a nice place for a quick 1hrs walk. Around the centre we found a couple of Spot flies. At the first hide, which overlooked a feeding station we saw very little on the bird front but we both saw a new mammal in the form of a **Bank vole**. We watched this cool little creature for a bit before moving off to the next hide. Even though the woodland looked good there was little of note in here.



Sculthorpe Moor

At the next hide which overlooked a reed bed there were more Marsh Harriers. Outside the hide was a big bird table which was being used by 4 Bullfinch....very nice to see. There was an eccentric looking chap at the end of the hide taking pics of them and after about a minute I heard his motor drive winding! I couldn't believe it, in this day and age someone shooting film! Absolutely crazy, then again he was a Nikon owner and we know how mental that lot are ;) Also we finally got our first **Coal Tit** of the trip at this table. I don't know if Coal tit is a rare bird in Norfolk or not but if so we should do a swap. 6 Manx Coal Tits for 6 Norfolk Reed Warblers. That seems fair to me. There wasn't much else to this reserve and with the overcast weather there were no Dragonflies flying so we left at 11.05, not quite sure where the 2 hours went but time flies when you're having fun.

Next stop was back East and a place we had meant to visit at least twice by now, Great Ryburgh. This is the Honey Buzzard watch point. You walk halfway up a small hill and sit there watching over a distant Woodland.



Great Ryburgh

When we arrived we were pleased to see a handful of people there already and since we were back in Norfolk they were all friendly. It seemed our luck was out and even though the weather was now nice with a clear blue sky, the knowledgeable chap told us that no Honey Buzzards had been seen yet this spring. This was a major downer as they normally return from Africa on the 17th of May like clockwork. We sat down and over the woods we could see Hobby's feeding, doing that cool thing with their feet, and there was a Yellowhammer nearby. After an hour it seemed pointless and we could see that this was a waste of our quickly depleting time in Norfolk so we reluctantly moved off.

After lunch we continued East and arrived at Kelling Heath at 1.20pm. This was another lowland heath area with gorse bushes dotted around. This was the last time we'd planned to visit a place with this type of habitat so we really had to see the specialities it had to offer. In the car park was a Bird Tour Guide's car so we felt quite hopeful. I then tried to navigate by remembering where I had been a few years previous but was failing miserably. I could hear tutting coming from behind me ha ha but then as we rounded a corner we saw the guide coming back with his customer. Amazingly the guide said to us, "Are you here for the Dartford Warbler?"..... Handy! He then dropped the bomb, "Ah you have just missed it singing its head off... just over there" (literally 50 yards away). I asked how long ago and he said, "Ooo about 10 minutes ago but it might still be there". We practically sprinted off to the location but try as we might there was no sign at all. It's not a difficult song to recognise but all we heard were more Yellowhammers (always nice to hear though as they seem to be practically extinct on the Isle of Man). Today was not going well at all, this was another bird we were dying to see and our chance had gone. Maybe this was us being slowly dropped back down to Isle of Man birding levels to stop us getting massively depressed when we got home. :D We walked around the heath some more but apart from seeing a section that had been burnt, probably due to the 25 degree searing heat,



A burnt Kelling Heath

and a small unidentified lizard we saw nothing else so left at 2.50pm.

Next stop was a place called the Farmland Bird Project. In the ace Norfolk birding book it mentions this place as a new reserve which is trying to use good farming practices to help declining farming birds like Turtle Dove, Grey Partridge, Quail, etc. This sounded good to us especially for Turtle Dove and I had pinpointed this place as the big chance to see one of them as the book gave it a 70% chance! We arrived at 3.40pm but it didn't start well as in the yard a big muscley bloke with his top off had Wendy going weak at the knees. A big walk was quickly knocked on the head as she could hardly walk after that :P. So, instead, we went to the first "hide" which, said in the book, looked over a feeding station. The "hide" was a shed with windows and since it was now 25 degrees C felt like a greenhouse. Looking out of the window there wasn't even a feeder let alone a station! We then both realised we couldn't hear any birds calling or singing at all.... and with no signs mentioning it being a reserve or anything we came to the conclusion that since the book had been published this place must have closed down or something. Such a pity, it sounded like a great idea. Within 5 minutes of arriving we left!

With the temperature being so high and there being no wind we were showing signs of rare optimism for our last final attempt at Nightjars that evening. As we had time before dusk we decided to nip into Flitcham Abbey Farm again on the long journey west. Maybe there would be a Turtle Dove sitting on the wires or maybe for once on our 27th attempt the Little Owl (that was 100% guaranteed here) would make an appearance? We arrived at 7.40pm and we had the place to ourselves. Again there was very little activity so we decided to look at the well used logbook. The first entry my eyes locked onto was Turtle Dove at 3pm that day..... Nooooooooooooo! Not another nearish miss. We need renaming to Team "just missed it" I think. Also in the book were several entries for Little Owl and one was very detailed saying the bird was on the far fence around a small tree. We both thought, "Yeah it's not going to be there now!".....but we both looked at the distant tree and one fence post looked longer than the others... sure enough there was the little blighter! Finally we had caught up with the elusive bird. Only my second ever **Little Owl**. We watched it flying around and hunting for a while but when it finally flew out of sight we decided to move on. This had been our first bit of luck today, I hoped we hadn't peaked too early!

We had decided we would put all our eggs in the Dersingham basket after our previous successful (ish) attempt and this looked like the correct decision as when we got there at 8.45pm both car parks were full! The second we got out of the car we were both surrounded by tons of midgies. Oooo this was more like it, every time we had heard or read about Nightjar watching, the horrific midge problems were always mentioned. Surely tons of midgies would equal Nightjar! I thought I would be dead clever and take a shortcut to the viewing position since we had already been here once. Surely I knew the paths like the back of my hand..... we got lost. After 10 minutes and several confused looks from Wendy, I admitted my mistake and we turned back. As we walked down the main path there were about 10 people at the bench on the ancient sea cliff. I couldn't understand this, when it got darker surely they would be looking down onto the dark ground and have little chance of seeing one. Down at the lower level were another 4 blokes slowly pacing around the

boardwalk. We had a little giggle watching them pace about, I assumed it was because they didn't know what else to do while waiting. Round at our spot there was nobody but a bit further on were another 2 blokes. In total there were about 18 people there. This increased our optimism more than ever. This amount of people surely meant the conditions were right. The midgie problem was really bad though, no amount of wafting helped. I was caked in 50% DEET too and that wasn't stopping them either, we were both being bitten everywhere. In the end we realised what the funny pacing blokes were doing!!! Slowly pacing kept the midgies away quite well :) At around 9.20pm the first Nightjars started churring. We both stopped pacing and watched. The light was going off quite quickly and the ground was very dark but suddenly as I looked towards the blokes further over I spotted a movement behind them from the trees, it was really low to the ground and difficult to pick up but I got my bins on it and screamed at Wendy **NIGHTJAR!!!** I could see its white wing patches and everything! But I then went from a massive high to a terrible low as I instantly realised how hard it was going to be to get Wendy onto it. In my panic though, I managed to give good directions (for once) and she got the bird in her bins too! YES YES YES. We even managed to stay on the bird flying in its cool 'zipping around way' till it landed on a distant conifer where it churred again... soooooooo cool! We both cheered and did a celebratory jump about dance. We could not believe it. This was our last possible chance and we had seen one. It was like a 90th minute winner. I looked across at the two blokes further on and they were looking in the bird's direction through their scopes. The light was really bad now and with the midgies biting us constantly we quickly made the decision to leave. We skipped back with humongous grins on our faces. As we went past the blokes on the boardwalk and the people up at the bench (who all stank of insect repellent) I looked at them and could tell they hadn't seen the bird or any others. They were all looking severely depressed. How lucky were we? Of the 18 people there only 4 of us saw the bird that flew! On the way back to base camp we saw a Muntjac deer at the side of the road too. Cool. What a great last full day in Norfolk, it started badly but couldn't have ended any better. We got back at 10.35pm, where Wendy won the midgie bite competition with 10 to my 7 (although I won the reaction competition as in the next few days my bites came up like I had been stung by wasps or something!).

Friday 21st May 2010

Neither of us died of anaphylactic shock during the night and we got up at 7.30am and decided to visit Blakeney to look around before we left (more like so Wendy could locate more Deli/Coffee shops!). At 10.30am we left base camp for the last time and headed westwards on the start of our long journey back to Heysham. By Thursday night I still hadn't worked out a good place to visit on the return journey and in desperation I thought maybe Rutland water was sort of on our way home. I quickly rerouted our journey and ditched off several sites and it sort of made sense. We kept Titchwell on the plan and arrived there at 11.11am. When we were here in September we dubbed it emptywell as it was absolutely rubbish. This time there was at least some water in the fresh marsh but yet again the birds were quite far off. Compared to Cley, Titchwell is terrible. I still struggle to work out how Titchwell is the most visited RSPB reserve in the UK. We wandered right out to the sea this time and got a new bird for the trip **Eider** but that was it. On the way out Wendy asked the bloke if he knew directions to the Red-necked Grebe that had been reported on the text alerts during the week. He gave us directions but also said he thought the bird was moribund. We decided to not bother even though it would be a new bird for the trip, we didn't like the idea of looking at a bird near death. Unfortunately just after leaving the county of Norfolk we didn't have a choice in this matter as a female Pheasant decided to walk across the road with two chicks behind it. The road was long and straight though so it was easily visible. I stopped to try let them across but the chicks turned back, I thought it was ok but as I looked up I saw a UPS courier van coming the other way and to my horror it wasn't braking at all. Even though he could easily see the birds in the road he just drove straight over the female Pheasant as she tried to get back to her chicks. I was absolutely fuming, I wanted to turn round and chase after him. How anyone can purposely kill a defenceless animal is totally beyond me, what an absolute moronic scumbag. Good advertising from UPS that, I'll be using FEDEX from now on.

A few hours later we had just passed through Peterborough when Wendy spotted a large raptor coming over the road. We both were still in Norfolk mode so assumed Marsh Harrier but quickly ditched that as the bird turned and we clearly saw its wings and tail... we hadn't expected this at all. **Red Kite!** Wahey.

Finally at 4.02pm we arrived at Rutland Water, the biggest freshwater body in England they say... don't quote me on that though, it didn't look that big. Luckily for us the reserve closed its gates at 8pm so it would do us perfectly as my sat nav said 4 hours from here to Heysham.. perfect. This reserve is run by Anglian water and what a great job they are doing. In the first area there was something like 6 hides within about 1km of lake shore line. In the other section of the reserve further round there was something like 20 hides dotted around, absolutely brilliant. We walked out towards the Osprey viewpoint and looked in each hide on the way. In one of them was a well grumpy bloke. As we walked quietly into the hide the bloke moaned then a few minutes later he claimed that we had scared off a Little Egret. It was

lucky we were both very tired by this point or he would have got both barrels. What a tool. We got to the Osprey viewpoint and we were very impressed to see that Anglian water have set up a 24 hour watch on the birds which is run, I think, by volunteers.



Osprey Viewpoint at Rutland Water

They were all walky talkied up and everything. Very professional. "Breaker breaker good buddy, I've got a bogey at 9 o'clock"... "roger that roger"... "scratch one bogey, I've just wiped my nose." Arf arf. Anyway, Wendy managed to spot one of the **Ospreys** on the opposite bank and pointed it out to the volunteers (I think it's supposed to be the other way round like) so they offered to let Wendy use their scope to have a better look. After watching them for a while we decided we would go and have a look at the other part of the reserve further round. It was here a few days earlier that there had been a Broad-billed Sandpiper which would have been cool but a surprise Black tern would do me nicely. We managed to get lost walking on a single path back to the visitor centre (my fault oops) but luckily managed to get through a fence back onto the real path. As we got to the centre my attention was caught by a Kestrel flying into a man made nest box, I was just about to tell Wendy but she interrupted me and shouted, "SNAAAAAAAKE!" She had managed to spot a relatively large **Grass Snake** that was nearly entirely submerged in this small overgrown pond.



Grass Snake

We watched it for about 5 minutes until it disappeared completely into the pond. Our first ever wild snake..... fantastic.

We left there at 5.45pm and headed for the Egleton side of the reserve. We entered there at 5.59pm with 2 hours to explore it before the gates shut. As we walked off Wendy spotted another big raptor over the trees not too far away. It was another Osprey which must have been flying off to feed and we had a brilliant view of it flying past.....smart. There were hides everywhere here but we only had time to check out the northern section. Unfortunately we were seeing the same birds as in Norfolk so didn't add anything new until we got to the (very nice) Sandpiper and Dunlin hides which overlooked what looks like a shallow man made scrape. I wouldn't be surprised if Anglian Water had just made this section because they felt like making somewhere nice for birds. Take note Manx Government!



Rutland's wader scrape

This was the place where the Broad-billed Sandpiper had been the day before and we could see why, it was like Wader heaven. There were a few Dunlin and Sanderling around and further away we could see a bigger wader, eventually it flew a bit closer and we were able to ID it as a **Greenshank**. Not exactly a rare bird but our first one of the trip. As time was rapidly ticking we went back on ourselves visiting the hides we had skipped past. In the first one I spotted a Great Crested Grebe really close in to the bank. With the sun low and at a perfect angle I thought I could get a great photo of it in a hide further up the bank. We quickly moved up but it wasn't at that hide so we moved on again and again. It wasn't at any hide.... Eh? I then looked at the time, it was 7.20 and we needed to make our way back to the car so we didn't get locked in at 8pm. We had to ditch off the last two hides in this section to get back in time. The next day when looking at Birdguides I saw that there had been two Black Terns at one of the hides we'd had to miss out at the exact time we were there! You couldn't make this stuff up. Unbelievable! We managed to get to the car quite quickly so decided to eat our packed lunch/tea. After that though we both realised our bladders wouldn't hold out till the boat and luckily for us there was a toilet block in the car park..... Phewwww! There was only one toilet though so by the time I'd been it was now 7.50pm! Wendy then went and when she hadn't appeared after a few minutes I started to panic. 7.53...7.54... EEEEkkkkk I started to plan how I would smash through the locked gate with my car or maybe use two of Wendys hair clips to pick the padlock. At 7.55 she emerged and I wheelspun out of the car park and zipped through the open gate to immense relief (although there was nobody about at all, I bet they don't even lock the gate!) That slight excitement signalled the end of our Birding holiday. We were both completely shattered by this point and probably couldn't have done another days birding anyway. We only managed to get back to Heysham by keeping topped up with Lucozade shots.

By the end of the trip Wendy had seen 18 new birds and I'd seen 9. We'd both seen 3 new mammals and 1 new reptile. We'd seen a total of 148 species of birds in our 7 day trip. We seemed to be about 50/50 in our luck, we got to see some great birds but had also missed some beauties too. The Bluethroat dip will haunt us for a long time especially as the bird is still there a month later!! Our favourite bird was the Oriental Pratincole on the first day. What a bird and the

view we got couldn't have been better. To see the rarest kind of Pratincole that visits the UK before any of the more common ones is crazy too. On the text alert front I had received 129 texts in the 7 days and we didn't miss anything because a text had failed or arrived too late so it seems Birdguides have tightened up their system a lot.

Yet again we loved North Norfolk, feeling welcome and knowing that everyone is friendly makes all the difference. Nearly everyone we met was a birder who was happy to share their knowledge. Neither of us wanted to leave, if only a rich person would decide to sponsor two people to live in North Norfolk and do an experiment to see if they could survive not going to work and birding all day, everyday.....that would be handy! :) The only downer to the holiday was that the lack of Easterlies meant there was just no migrant movement in what should have been a week jam packed with exciting migrants. But on the plus side this just means that we will have to go back again..... soon :D.

Species List

Avocet	Fulmar	Little Egret	Sanderling
Barn Owl	Gadwall	Little Grebe	Sandwich Tern
Bearded Tit	Gannet	Little Gull	Sedge Warbler
Bittern	Garden Warbler	Little Owl	Shag
Black headed gull	Garganey	Little Ringed Plover	Shelduck
Blackbird	Goldcrest	Little Tern	Shoveler
Blackcap	Golden Oriole	Longtailed Tit	Skylark
Black-tailed Godwit	Goldfinch	Magpie	Song Thrush
Blue tit	Grasshopper Warbler	Mallard	Sparrowhawk
Brent Goose	Great Crested Grebe	Manx shearwater	Spoonbill
Bullfinch	Great spotted Woodpecker	Marsh Harrier	Spotted Flycatcher
Buzzard	Great Tit	Marsh Tit	Starling
Canada Goose	Green Woodpecker	Meadow Pipit	Stock Dove
Carrion Crow	Greenfinch	Mistle Thrush	Stone Curlew
Cettis Warbler	Greenshank	Montagus Harrier	Stonechat
Chaffinch	Grey Heron	Moorhen	Swallow
Chiffchaff	Grey Partridge	Mute Swan	Swift
Coal Tit	Grey Plover	Nightingale	Tawny Owl (h)
Common Gull	Grey Wagtail	Nightjar	Teal
Common Sandpiper	Greylag goose	Nuthatch	Temmincks Stint
Common Tern	Guillemot	Oriental Pratincole	Tree Pipit
Coot	Herring gull	Osprey	Tree Sparrow
Cormorant	Hobby	Pheasant	Treecreeper
Corn Bunting	House Martin	Pied Wagtail	Tufted Duck
Cuckoo	House Sparrow	Pochard	Turnstone
Curlew	Jackdaw	Raven	Water Rail (h)
Dipper	Jay	Razorbill	Wheatear
Dotterel	Kestrel	Red Kite	Wigeon
Dunlin	Kittiwake	Red legged Partridge	Willow Warbler
Duncock	Knot	Reed Bunting	Wood Pigeon
Egyptian Goose	Lapwing	Reed Warbler	Woodcock
Eider	Lesser Black backed gull	Ring Ouzel	Wren
Feral Pigeon	Lesser Whitethroat	Robin	Yellow Wagtail
	Linnet	Rook	Yellowhammer